ABSTRACT

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Security Measures is a collection of seven short stories that investigate need, as well as the responses by characters to that need. In some instances, the response is straightforward, as in the story of a small boy at a loss for friends who summons one in the form of Transformer robot Optimus Prime. In others, the cause and effect are less tidy: A young woman reeling over the demise of her marriage endeavors to exercise control over a home that's not hers, while a grandson whose guardian suffers a slip in mental acuity invents zombies to explain the sudden strange behavior. Whether real or hoped for, physical or abstract, how well each responsive yield comes to serve its character depends on how it's explored in relation to other characters and infringing conditions.

SECURITY MEASURES: STORIES

By

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Brighter Waters

Norah dwells unhappily in the Gulf of Mexico, although she can remember a time she was happy before. She can run her mind back over the years of her unhappiness like the scales of a sea bass and remember a time the ocean was cooler and more fluid, pumping marvels past Norah, orange tussocks of algae and polyps and manikin fish flouncing by in daily parades, swirling pageants directed by unseen revolutions conducting the ocean, drawing forth just for Norah dazzling sonatas of colors and creatures and light, each swell of music exquisite and captivating and no two ever the same.

Now she bobs toward middle age in the same cerulean gulf, the same occasional passing clouds of seabed methane gas, although gone are the cool and regenerative currents, the brilliantly puppeteered specimens and their cavalcades. In today's overwarm mesopelagic zone, the fish are stupid, and fart a lot. The sea cows don't respect personal space. The other mermaids, mostly just passing through on the Yucatan circuit, speak Spanish, a language Norah thinks is garish on purpose and has never bothered trying to learn. It's on account of the other mermaids she won't venture forth from the lip of her inlet: If they're going, she'd rather stay, looking out from her tiresome pocket of lagoon.

She watches three migrant mermaids shuffle by on their sides, needlessly stabbing the points of their argument hard enough to bubble and blemish the surface, through which wet and dry beaks lift and dip from the sky. A calm spot under a large,

land-jutting crag swims with conger eels, common things with a predictable underbite and dull eyes. Norah watches one of the eels bob and circle the pack in tight rotations that grow tighter, then again tighter still. Norah squints at the eels, who seem to be snapping from view, yanked by an invisible hand, perhaps, or a net. She sees three of them go and still can't figure it out. The angle of light seems to be playing tricks. In the ocean, she sinks a long ways down in the water. Floats over. Looks up. Floats over some more. The only thing to see is there's nothing to see; that, and a loosely plaited pack of eels.

Then, as she's watching, another eel—gone. So quick she can't see where it's fled.

What does she care, fisherman or sea beast, bio lab or riptide? Of her 178 years, more than half have been exceedingly dull. Norah begins swimming up the crooked wall of the rock, into the gauzy white glow of brighter waters. It's been a long time, what with the sea cows tending to bunch around and overcrowd the margins of the shallows. Today, though, they are clear. Bovine-free. Norah had forgotten how nice the rise—unimpeded—to the top could be. Still warm, but nice, anyway.

There is no warning—that's the fantastic thing. The current scoops her up easily, like a fistful of mites. By way of somersault, she's sucked headfirst into a shadowy cavern that turns out to be the mouth of the secret underground tunnel, one made of packed mud and earthworms. The earthworms are so *pink,* she thinks. Norah didn't know there was this shade of color, like the inside of a comb jelly, but exposed, more immediate for being laid bare. She wants to reach out and touch it, but fears that

would make it familiar somehow. Above all, she loves that it's strange. Norah sticks out her tongue and presses it to the ribbed wall of invertebrates. The quick-thundering thrum, she thinks, could be the thrill of her life.

Because oh, the pleasure's too much to bear. Norah throws back her head, letting the water stream over her unblinking eyes and fill the whole open grin of her mouth. Where could she be headed to—and so fast! She can tell that much—that she's going quite fast—from the bubbles the water kicks up as it brushes her torso, skips off the sharp peaks of her hips, and flips over the many stacked rows of her scales. But as to where? It'd be pointless to even try and guess, especially here, in this skinny but swift underground tunnel, and the not knowing fills her with unspeakable glee.

The tunnel water is strong, but Norah hangs tight, even when the pressure zips her sideways through a bend, or passes over a deep spot, all the current gone momentarily loose before it sweeps her back up again. In all her life, she's never known anything like it. Distraction's intolerable—Norah flinches when an eel tail brushes her ear.

"Excuse me," says Norah, and the eel moves away.

The tunnel streaks them past root systems and grub colonies and small bones ribbing out from the sides. From above, or what Norah thinks is above, there's no light leaking through; from below, no sloshing swing of the tide—it's impossible to say how long it's been when Norah and the eels are coughed out into a small but oversupplied pond, the pond catching light from a hurricane pulling away north, its span of scorched clouds thinning into a streak. Norah fights the weight of her eyes to

watch the low distant lightning flicker like the hatching of some dream. A nearby house on stilts pinches out its plumes of candlelight. *Just wonderful*, she thinks of the marvel light, of the rearing solidity rising up from the wet sod, before bobbing onto her back and falling fast asleep.

When Norah awakes in the pond, the sun's already high in the sky. How many years have passed since she's seen the sun like this, raw and whole and unmuted by water? Most days, to her, it's nothing more than a glimpse of cobalt in an otherwise azure world. It's been decades, she decides. Half a century.

Norah takes a look around, breaststroking and breathing in through her nose. The surface of things is brighter than she recalls. Crisper. The air pricks the skin of her hairline, the breeze chilling her cheeks and raising lines of small bumps that run down her arms. Norah draws a second breath, a third. The flood's receded. The house is still there. A man's high-stepping toward her in boots through the sludge.

The man peers down into the water, then jumps back a little. "Holy smokes!" he cries. "An eel!"

"Yoo-hoo," Norah calls out, waving from the center of the pond. "Over here?"

"Lady, watch it!" the man says. "There's an eel in that pond."

"I know," she says. "There's three more in here with it. You wouldn't happen to have a net?"

After the eels are flopped dead in the grass, Norah and the man have a chance to acquaint themselves.

"This is, like, trippy," he says. "A real mermaid?"

“In the flesh,” Norah says, happily, fanning her scales. She can’t remember the last time someone was glad to see her.

“But how’d you end up here?”

“Magic,” says Norah, and at first she’s joking, but the look on the man’s face is too good to be true. “*Black* magic,” she tells him.

“*Really*?” he whispers, and Norah can’t help but widen her eyes and nod.

“Well, I’ll have to take you back to the ocean,” the man says. “Naturally.”

“Why’s that?” Norah asks. She’s stricken but fights to keep her voice steady. She only just got here! Wherever she is; the festered smell of the wind tells her still west of swampland. She wonders if the hurricane didn’t churn up a whole underground wicker of tunnels, lashing up the coast of Southeastern Texas and connecting, among other things, this pond to the Gulf of Mexico south of Palacios.

“Mm,” says the man, shifting his weight, “I can’t go on keeping you in my backyard.”

“Why not?” Norah asks. “Who has to know?”

The man chews this over, considering. “I’m not too good at lying,” he says.

“So don’t lie.” From her hair, she wrings a green beard of water. “Just don’t say anything at all.”

“But you’re a *mermaid*. You’re real beautiful.”

Norah casts the man a withering stare. She was beautiful once, but mermaids live a very long time. Norah’s twice the age of most humpback whales, and it shows.

“I mean, I can see how beautiful you once were,” he says. “I mean,” he says, “you have pretty eyes.

“Besides,” he rushes on, “you want to stay here, in this pond? Isn’t it kind of cramped? We can just throw you in the back of my truck. The coast’s not even all that far.”

“But round-trip,” Norah maintains, dreading the idea that, after all this, she would end up right back where she started. Her mind gropes for some incentive, some bait. “If I stay,” she says, “I can tell you your fortune.”

“You can do that?”

“Sure,” says Norah. “All merpeople are prophetic. It’s a kind of specialty.”

“All right,” the man says. He confesses there may have been a time in his life that he had a soft spot for scratcher tickets, but couldn’t really afford to buy them. She can predict his odds for him, he jokes, although what are the odds of a mermaid washing up in his lawn?

“All right,” Norah agrees. “Now bend closer.” The man bends down far enough for Norah to bring her arms through the water and take his hand in the two of hers. The man jumps a little. She grins. This is fun.

Norah cups the man’s palm in her hands and studies it for a few moments. “Mm,” she says. “Ooh. That’s interesting.”

“What is?” says the man. “What’s interesting?”

Norah runs her finger down a crease in the skin. “Strong lifeline,” she says slowly. “Clear thinker, well focused.”

“That’s true,” the man reasons. “That sounds like me. I find myself focusing all the time.”

“High sex drive,” says Norah, arching an eyebrow at the man, who blushes. “But in general a strong vitality.”

“Oh, sure,” says the man. “Vital, that’s me. I’ve always felt that way. What’s it say in there about money?”

“I was getting to that,” says Norah. “Please don’t interrupt.”

“Sorry.” The man scratches the back of a leg with his shoe.

“Ohh,” says Norah, running her finger down a second line of the hand, the middle line. “Now that’s *very* interesting.”

“What?” says the man. “Tell me, please!”

“Well, it shows here that your money line was weak before, but you see here after this little line intersects with the big one, like a tiny cross?”

The man nods. He’s paying close attention. He’s very, very well focused. “I see it, I see it.”

“Well, before the cross, up here close to the fingers, your money line was weak. But after the cross—some major life event, maybe? who knows what—it starts running dark and deep. Your money line gets really strong. After something out of the ordinary comes along.”

“Hm,” says Norah, “I wonder what that could be.”

She releases the man’s hand and draws back into the water. The man stays crouched down for a long minute, staring deeply into his palm. Norah watches, holding her breath, the peel of her gills popping open to undulate.

All of a sudden, the man jumps up. “I have to go!” he says. “Will you be here when I get back?”

“Sure,” Norah says. “I’ve got nowhere to be.”

The man hurries to his truck parked in the driveway. He’s back not ten minutes later, running out to the pond. In one of his hands, he’s waving a small scrap of paper.

“I won, I won!” The man presses the paper to his lips, specks of silver and gray sticking to his big, breathless grin.

He tells Norah how he drove to the 7-11, where he bought one of every scratcher ticket and scratched them all—right there on the spot! Four of the scratcher tickets were duds. On the fifth one, he won a thousand dollars! He was so happy he kissed the cashier—right there in the store! Right there on her mouth! Then he came rushing back here.

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” says Norah. “Black-magic mermaids are good luck, you know.”

“They are?”

“Of course,” she says. “Everyone knows that. For such a good thinker, you’re not very well versed in mythology.”

“Well,” says the man. “I know one thing. You’re not going anywhere, missy.” He presses his lips again to the ticket. “You’re my newfound good-luck charm.”

“If you say so,” Norah says. She gives a little flick of her tail.

As it turns out, the tunnel’s not a permanent fixture, but a temporary byproduct of topographical suction produced by the storm. By nightfall, its pond entrance has sewn closed, leaving Norah cut off and alone. Fine by her. She likes it here, with no flatulent mahi-mahis or chittering *Calós*. For dinner the man brings her

butter-dunked prawns and strips of seaweed laid out on a board. The seaweed's dried, not as fresh or supple as what she's used to, but Norah plunks it in the water and mashes it up with her molars. "Not bad," she says. "When you get past the eel aftertaste."

"All right," says the man, drawing up a milk crate to sit on. "Let's get down to business."

"What business?" Norah asks. She sets a prawn tail down next to her in the water.

"Look around," says the man. "My property's been ripped to shreds by Hurricane Jezebel. Storm tore up my farm, or what used to be my farm, anyway, before last night left me with a sky-high deductible and not one single fishie, excepting, of course, this one right here."

"That's what you do?" Norah asks. "You raise fish?"

"Oh, sure," says the man, leaning over, taking a closer look at her tail. "I've been raising trout since I was a young gup myself. Is that what you call an adipose fin?"

"How interesting," she says, swimming a bit away, but only a bit. "What very good luck."

"Now just how do you mean?" The man leaves off with his anatomization. He digs a notebook out of his back pants pocket and plucks the stub of a pencil from behind his ear.

"Well," says Norah, popping a prawn in her mouth, "trout are the merperson sign of riches. Dead trout are the sign of *great* riches."

“Riches,” says the man. “But I’ve had this trout farm all my life. What riches have I got?”

“Trout, apparently, for one thing—”

“*Dead* trout,” the man corrects.

“—*and*,” Norah continues, “didn’t you just meet me?”

“Oh. Right.” The man shakes his head, remembering. “You know I think I’m pretty tired? It’s been a big day.”

“Maybe you should call it a night,” Norah says.

The last light in the man’s eyes flickers with interest. “You think so?”

“Absolutely I do.”

“Your devil powers tell you that?”

“They certainly did.”

“All right, then. It’s a night.”

Alone again, Norah swims the length of the pond. It’s not very big, although she feels big inside it. Norah feels around the hole of the tunnel entrance, still solidly plugged. She recaptures two of the prawns and moves them around in the water in the style of her one-time spectacle polyps, but it’s not the same, the pond water’s dense with shadows and silt. Through the clouds in the water she can’t see her own fin, which she tosses to shake off the sludge caught in her scales. On her back she wills the stars in the night sky to rouse themselves, wake and stir, but they only stay fixed, too weak to illuminate anything that could be of interest. When sleep finally comes, she’s not sorry for it.

Norah's awoken early the next day by the man violently shaking her shoulder. "It's a big one, a big one!" he keeps saying, over and over. "Wake up, water witch!"

"Ugh," says Norah. "I didn't sleep very well."

The man says, "Never mind about that. Give me the numbers!"

"The numbers?"

"They said it on the radio. The lottery jackpot's up to ninety-two million this week!"

"Oh," Norah yawns. "You should play."

"I should *win*," says the man. "I've got a secret weapon. Now tell me the numbers so I can go buy the ticket."

"OK," says Norah, looking around for the food board. "The numbers are six and thirty-two."

"And?"

"And what's to eat? Have you got any more of those prawns?"

"There's five numbers," says the man, frowning. "That's only two. Do you need to see my hand again?" And he shoves it at her.

"No, no," she says, waving it away. Norah feels tired, and has something of a headache. "The other numbers are eight, twelve, and two."

The man scribbles furiously into his notebook. Then he flips the pad closed and taps the dent of his temple. "About breakfast," he says. "I was thinking about that, and I've got just the thing."

Finally, she thinks, pushing back from the pond's edge to make room.

A minute later the man's waddling back, a heavy-looking sack held over his head. "Boy, you're sure lucky. And to think all this trout food would've gone to waste." He tips the sack over and starts shaking it. Gnarled pellets the size and appearance of small whelks rain down over Norah and bounce off her head.

"Cut it out!" Norah cries. "I can't eat this!"

"Nutrient-rich," the man sings. "Protein-fortified."

"Tastes terrible," Norah confirms, sampling. But by the time she looks up, the man's already halfway back to the house, weaving a bit side to side under the weight of the feed.

While he's gone, she tries eating some of the pellets, which are bloating and softening on the surface around her. She thinks if she had a glass of salt water to overpower the taste, she might be able to choke a few down, but the pond water's weak and mealy in her mouth. Norah swims a few laps for exercise and makes up her mind to talk to the man about food, and general quality of life. He'll listen to her, she decides. He was only overexcited this morning. This morning was only a small snafu.

"Did you win?" she asks the man, politely, upon his return. She's determined to start back off on the right foot, and so refrains from asking about the sequined fedora he's acquired in the short time he's been away, in spite of no part of it matching his work shirt or jeans.

The man shakes his head. "The drawing's not til this weekend. But don't worry, I've got big plans for us in the meantime."

"Oh?" Norah is surprised but pleased; big plans are what she's been hoping for. The man's certainly dressed for big plans. Maybe he's surprising her with a gift,

or a party. Maybe the people in his town want to meet her. If it's a gift, she hopes she can eat it.

"Yes," says the man, unbuttoning the cuffs of his shirt. "Witch fish, we're going to Vegas!"

"I wish you'd stop calling me that."

"If we leave right now, the drive takes less than a day," says the man, busying himself with his sleeves. "I've got the hotel booked, and I've loaded the back of my truck with buckets and some hay. Overnight! Farm-style! All the trout chow you can eat!" And before Norah can stop him, he's scooped her up from the pond in his arms.

"Oof," says the man. "Not as light as you used to be!"

"How the fuck would you know?" she hisses, thrashing on purpose to make it hard for him.

The man dumps Norah into his truck bed, then runs back to the house for his keys. Bits of straw jab uncomfortably into her backside. She squirms until she has a spot cleared, then drizzles water from one of the buckets onto her thighs. "Hey!" she calls out when he comes running back. She should have a say in this! Norah flicks some of the water in the direction of the man, but he only leaps through it like some fool flying fish. The door slams. The truck starts. The house on stilts begins gliding away, as if being pulled by an obstinate current.

There's nothing to be done but fume and flop around to pack down some of the hay. For a while, Norah manages to doze off; when she wakes up she's hungry enough to give the pellets another go. "Oh, no," says Norah, wiping her tongue on her

wrist. “Oh, no, no, no-no-no.” At the first pit stop, she commands the man under threat of voodoo death, and he buys her a bag of Cheetos.

Norah sucks fluorescent snack dust from her fingers and stares up at the yawn of sunken night overhead. Her heart swims up to greet it; the way the darkness moves out forever makes her think of home. Norah wonders if Vegas could have a sea, or a lake. The man had been right: After a day, the pond was starting to feel cramped, and starting to stink of rotting eel. While no part of her cares for kidnapping, she can’t say she loves the idea of returning to the farm, either. *Qué lástima,* Norah thinks sadly. *Ay-ay-ay.*

Day breaks over blue fields that turn green. Norah packs a small bolster of hay and places it under her neck, listening to transmitted voices leaking through the cab window. *Dale a tu cuerpo alegria, Macarena,* the voices urge, pleadingly, on a tailwind of static. It’s a beautiful day in Amarillo! They’re right about that much. The sun arcs over a cloudless sky as the truck trundles past signs for Santa Fe, White Rock, Albuquerque (there, a brief stop for bucket water and 5-hour Energy’s).

It’s a clear day and an open road. The wind flicks bits of hay into the air and sends them twitching off over Crownpoint, Gallup. Indian Wells. Outside of Flagstaff, one of the voices summons a guitar and steel drum accompaniment and starts singing something about women and salt and regret, a nibble, a season, something about somebody’s fault, who knows whose. *The eels’,* Norah thinks wretchedly, turning onto her side. She just knows they were somehow to blame.

The air cools. The sky sinks into a deeper blue. The man’s no longer steering them the few slight degrees north; rather, the truck’s headed a unilateral west,

beaming them straight toward the sun setting over the land. Norah readies herself for night, plumping her hay pillow and pulling her hair around her chest and waist.

And night does fall—but then lifts only a few short minutes later.

The man raps on the window with the back of his hand. “There she is!” he cries. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

Norah props herself up in the truck bed. They’re barreling toward a pixilated dawn, one that’s purple and glittered and rising larger than the actual sun in the sky. “Vegas?” Norah wonders aloud.

“Vegas!” a respondent cries out. A car with young men dripping out all its windows is passing them on the left. One of the young men holds up two of his fingers at Norah and waggles his head. “Yeah! Vegas, baby!”

Norah gazes around. She sees now they’re speeding down a light-streaked corridor with lots of other vehicles, most of them packed to the gills with other young people. The young people smile at Norah and wave. One of them bares his backside to her, which is flattering. Norah lifts her face to the wind and sniffs. Vegas smells good, she decides. Saline.

They pull into a motel on the outskirts of town, where Vegas rises above them, all dazzle and height. Norah’s no longer the least bit tired, having freshened up with the rest of the bucket water. She fluffs out her hair and pinches her cheeks. *Vegas*, she thinks, toying with, stretching the word in her mind. *Watch out, Vegas*. The man grunts as he slings Norah up over his shoulder. This time, she doesn’t protest.

In the motel lobby, she greets the lady behind the front desk. “Hello,” Norah says, as demurely as possible while hanging down alongside the man. She plucks a small piece of hay from her mouth.

“Yeah,” says the woman. “Sign here,” she tells the man.

“I am a mermaid,” Norah announces.

“Must be a convention.”

“Do you want to know how I got here?” Norah says. “Magic. *Black* magic, if you must know—”

“Magic shows at The Flamingo, every night except Tuesdays.” The woman sighs up at the man, hands him a key. “No drugs, no fires, no fog machines.” She pauses to look him dead in the eye. “*No* circus animals—stuffed or otherwise. Check out’s at 11. Don’t be late.”

“Yeah, don’t be,” Norah says, giggling, feeling suddenly playful. She swats the man lightly on the thigh. “Don’t be,” she says a second time.

“Sign said breakfast is included?” says the man, and the woman shoves two bags of animal crackers at his chest.

Norah hums some on the walk to the room, swinging out of the way of a sea cow-sized ICE machine, of beautiful red—COKE—and blue—PEPSI—portals of light. She imagines the portals swing open to reveal tunnels squirming with incandescent larvae, and promises herself time later to explore. Norah smiles broadly at a couple they pass on the stairwell. In the spluttering shadows, she can’t see their faces, but she is sure they smile back.

Norah and the man come to a stop outside their door while the man fumbles with the key. Norah gazes at Vegas upside down over the balcony, and it twinkles at her like a nugget of treasure. *Magic city*, Norah thinks, remembering the low-flickering light from the first night she washed up. This is it, she decides. Vegas. The thing she's come for. She decides it at the moment her head reaches its cold-blooded capacity and she passes, happily, out.

Norah wakes up the next morning in a long box of linoleum hardly wider than her thighs. *Vegas*? she wonders, confused. It's not what she was expecting. Her fin and arms stick high out of a low line of water, but nothing aches worse than her back, which feels as crimped and stiff as if she were fossilized.

"Where are we?" she asks the man, whom, through an open door, she can see asleep on a lumpy bed. It's no consolation that he doesn't look much more comfortable than she feels, especially when the man doesn't move. Desperation starts to stir in the knuckles of Norah's spine.

"Oh, wake up!" Norah cries, groping along the side of the tub for anything to get his attention. Her hand lands on a seashell, but instinctively flings it away, the shell being waxy and obviously counterfeit. The shell pops off the wall tile and back into the tub; Norah sets to thrashing to kick it off.

The commotion, at last, disturbs the man from sleep. In one fluid motion, he rolls clean off the bed and jumps up, rubbing his hands in a manner that suggests his back feels just fine after all.

"First things first," says the man. "I'm off to the Bellagio for a little blackjack before lunch. You can take these." And he tosses the cracker sacks into the tub.

“What do you mean?” Norah wails, writhing. “I don’t get to come?”

“My arms are tired,” the man says. “Besides, they won’t let you in without proper ID.”

“But you can’t just leave me!”

“Relax, devil dolphin! You’ve got to learn how to relax.” The man tips his fedora at himself in the mirror, the lines drawing together at the corners of his mouth, his gray eyes bulging out like twin water bugs. “I’ll be back later.”

It has to be the worst day Norah’s ever endured. The box water’s stale and specked with rust; it carries her backache down into her caudal peduncle. Norah slips into and out of difficult sleep. Twice when she wakes up she hears what she thinks could be Spanish wafting up from the room below, or the drains. Norah drops down and puts an ear to the floor, straining to make anything out of the gurgle of words. She’d take ten years of the pond, eels and all, over this. What was she ever thinking, swimming up that sea rock? The ocean was boring, but at least it wasn’t miserable. Norah misses the fish—even misses their farts. The farts were kind of cute in a sad way, she thinks. Little helpless blue bubbles that shimmied up through the sea, kicking through water that only got whiter and warmer, only to burst through the surface and break.

The man doesn’t come back until dinnertime. He’s missing his hat. He looks tired.

“Well,” he says, plopping down on the bed and easing off his shoes, “that didn’t go as well as I’d hoped.”

Norah snorts. “As well as *you’d* hoped.”

“Nah,” says the man. “Before noon, I lost everything but the shirt on my back, and that’s only because the Bellagio’s picky about dress code. Then I lost whatever insurance I had coming,” he chuckles, stretching out on the bed and poking his bellybutton, “in the unlikely event it ever comes.”

He sits back up and pulls off his socks. “It didn’t get better,” he adds, thoughtfully. “Come this weekend, though, everything will be OK.”

“How do you figure?” Norah says, glumly swirling a bit of tub water with her finger.

“Jackpot drawing’s this weekend, remember?”

“Oh,” Norah says. “Right.” She’d forgotten about the jackpot, but considers it now. She considers it a long minute before saying to the man, “I wouldn’t count on that.”

“No, it’s this weekend,” the man yawns. “I saw it on the TV.”

“No,” Norah says slowly, pulling herself up in the tub. “I wouldn’t count on those numbers.”

Norah sees the man’s body go stiff. “Now just what do you mean by that?”

“I wouldn’t count on that money coming in.”

“But the numbers!” the man says. He’s standing up now. His hair’s standing up, too, on either side of his head; the way it sticks straight out reminds Norah of puffer-fish fins. “You gave them to me!”

“I changed them,” says Norah. “I can do that.”

“Change them back!” the man howls, hands on his head, buggy eyes bright with fret. “Oh, please, oh, please. I’ll do anything if you’ll just change them back.”

"No," says Norah. "Those are the rules."

"But I'll do whatever you say! I'll take you to Vegas! We'll go right now—I promise we will!"

"No," Norah says, starting to cry. "I don't want Vegas anymore."

"You'll love it, you will!" says the man, who's crying now, too.

"I know," says Norah, weeping freely into the tub. "I know I would."

"Oh, please," the man says again, and Norah, finding that now she's begun blubbering it's not so easy to stop, allows herself to be hoisted once more.

And oh, Vegas is everything she thought it would be. From the bed of the truck, Norah holds her arms up to the great tilting reel of lights and noise, the people swaying about her in sequins and spangles, the most beautiful school of fish she's ever seen. Some of the people spill into the street to chase after her; still others run alongside the truck and snap photographs.

Norah lifts her face to the skyline, to the signs shining down in brilliant reverence. BILL'S GAMBLIN' HALL. MUST BE 21. WEDDINGS STARTING AT $135. All the sun-dappled colors shimmer inside her, and Norah knows it like she knows her own dolphin kick: For all the loneliness and humiliation she's ever suffered, for all the earthen and aquatic miseries she has endured, all her life has led to this specific delirium, to the effulgent wonders of this free-spinning moment and place.

The truck swings a right, and there it is: the most magnificent body of water Norah's ever seen. Flanked with towering palms and plush drapes of moss, the sapphire lake twinkles as fiercely as Vegas itself. It churns with crystalline waterfalls

and the happy feet of people floating by on pink inflatable rafts; a pond to one side hosts a family of fat koi.

"Oh," Norah breathes; then, in Spanish, "*Oh*."

Because it must, the truck pulls to a stop. Norah doesn't think twice, only vaults herself from the bed and flops onto the road. She ducks her head, cups her face, and rolls.

Carrier

I was born to a loving man and his loving wife, in the last of a long caravan of trailers, under a pitch-black sky punched through with stars. My mother said it was the most brilliant night of her life. She said it was so, even after the ringmaster wrapped my hopelessly pink body in a blanket and held me up to a light.

"Boy," said the ringmaster, sadly shaking his head, "I sure hope you can throw a knife."

What he meant was, I hadn't inherited my mother's condition, one trapped in a reshuffling anagram of genetics with no system of forecasts (a late great-uncle was said to have the disorder; before him, a distant cousin run away to Japan). In our traveling circus, my father worked as a strongman. Bending steel, snapping chains, the twin halves of his moustache twitching with concentration. He had one act where he lifted a young elephant with a single hand and stood under him, flexing and flashing a radiant set of teeth. Fantastic, but standard as far as circuses go.

My mother, though, she was something. Due to her rare and deeply recessive deformity, from the top of her head to her elegant toes, she was covered in blue scales that glistened gold when they caught light at a particular angle. The scales rippled down the sides of her body, shot textured rainbows over her forearms and thighs, traced the delicate ridges of her neck, and wrapped around each tip of her fingers. Her body looked like a river leaping with fish. The crowd heckled most of the circus's sideshow acts, jeered and littered their tents with the stumps of hotdogs. Not her. Not

my breathtaking, aquamarine mother. They went in one flap of her small tent, usually remained there several quiet minutes, and came out the other in a kind of unblinking awe. It was as if they wanted to keep the image of her swirling tributaries, her gold-lit face shining with pride, floating before their eyes as long as possible.

The ringmaster had been right about me, though. As I grew, my skin freckled but remained otherwise unremarkable. My quality of strength proved average at best. From a circus's standpoint, I was nothing more than a mouth gnawing away at an already meager margin of profit.

"Tell me," the ringmaster said to my parents in their kitchen, where he sat cross-legged after dinner, bouncing my cloth-cushioned bottom with his foot. "What do I do with this?"

My parents beamed down on me, where I clung to the ringmaster's calf like a bear, chewing and dripping drool down his boot.

"What you're doing is fine," my mother replied, spooning ice cream into dishes, passing a bowl to the ringmaster. He looked down and scooped me up from his leg. Absently fed me a dollop of vanilla, knowing it to be my favorite.

My teeth came in. My parents graduated me to solid foods. I had, they told me, an insurmountable appetite. The ringmaster wrung the felt from his hat and proposed a deal. He would have had to; he couldn't afford to lose my mother. The wait for her tent often exceeded an hour; I saw circus-goers come out only to return to the end of the line. The deal was this: My parents were to train me in a trick of passing quality by the time I was 7. Until then, he would provide for me as he provided for them, as he provided for all his performers.

Upon hearing the offer, my father laid a hand atop the ringmaster's and squeezed it with a gentleness only the supremely strong possess. He knew the ringmaster's unspoken wish: that I would someday produce an inheritor to the gene. For his generosity, my father could not deny him the hope.

I remember little discord or unhappiness from my early childhood, no squabbling or tantrums typical of most youth. No other children traveled with the circus, but I was the recipient of undivided attention from my parents and their friends. I can recall riding the backs of tigers at age 4, sitting on the laps of unicyclists as they raced over scraggy knolls behind the tents, passing drumstick torches between fire breathers as they prepared for their opening bursts of flame. Our circus was ancient and enchanted, luck-spun. Its history was imparted to me before I could read, how it had lumbered a million miles through the country, through ringmasters, wars, elephants, famines. As a boy, I was the darling of its backstage, and my dreams were the same as my days.

On my sixth birthday, my father declared my training was to begin, and he brought me to consult with the ringmaster over the options.

Juggling was out. Anyone could learn to sling pins or Arabian swords, said the ringmaster. I was furthermore too young to train animals, they agreed; my voice wasn't deep enough to command a cub. I could shoot from a cannon, but the ringmaster was worried about crowd response to a young boy being stuffed into projectile artillery.

My mother wouldn't have me associating with the clowns, who smoked pinched rolls of paper in the backs of the moving trucks after shows. When they

emerged, their red eyes looked as if they'd bled rainbow puddles into the cradles of their cheekbones, greasepaint pooled in the pouches of skin they hadn't bothered to wash, only rubbed at carelessly with a cloth.

The contortionists, sisters, were friends of my mother's. They thrilled at the idea of having me join their slippery duet. I think they considered me more of a pet than a little boy, perhaps because they exhibited some animal tendencies themselves. In shimmering green bodysuits, they popped their grinning heads between the backs of their legs and scuttled like crabs to where I lay flat on their mat, imagining, as I had been instructed, my body and each of my limbs waving gently over their positions on the floor. "Now," said one, bending my wrists to prepare me for a basic bridge, "lift!" The sisters, still grinning, placed their own palms on the floor and raised their legs so their thighs pointed over their shoulders, gun barrels shooting forth knees, calves and toes. The horizontal J shapes of their bodies they supported only with the four identical bases of their hands. And those unceasing grins, which seemed to share a strength of their own.

I willed my own spine to float up from the ground. When that didn't work, I crunched my teeth and toes, hoping to squeeze my vertebrae upward into the arc. *Lift*, I commanded them. *Lift!* The sisters popped their bodies into the shape of upright wheels and used their feet to paddle in circles around me, chasing one another, giggling, oblivious to my efforts. After a week and a half of lying like a limp noodle on the floor, my father said it was time to see the acrobats.

"So," said the lead acrobat, dusting chalk from his hands, "Is he a tumbler?"

"No," my father replied, placing a hand on my shoulder.

The acrobat spit into each of his palms. “Is he a flier?” he asked, taking hold of his ladder.

“No,” my father repeated. “He is not.”

“Then what use is he to me?” said the acrobat, scrambling up the ladder like a flurry-legged spider. My mouth widened as I watched him go, tilting my head to gaze up at the platform that appeared to me like a speck in the sky.

“Train him,” my father called up. “He’s a good boy. And,” he said, shaking one of the legs of the ladder, causing the acrobat to freeze and collapse the length of his body against the flight of the rungs, “ringmaster’s orders.”

The next morning, I was back on the mat.

“Tuck and roll,” the acrobat commanded.

I screwed my body into what I imagined was a very tight ball and peered cautiously sideways at the acrobat.

“*Roll*,” the acrobat said, uncrossing his arms to make the motion with his hands.

I managed something of a squat on my head before toppling over at the feet of the acrobat, who rubbed the tops of his eyes and motioned for me to follow him to the gymnast bars. He slapped the insides of my hands with chalk and hoisted me up to reach the taller of the two. “See how long you can hang here,” he said, releasing my waist. “Try to smile.”

I counted nine seconds between clenched teeth before my left hand slipped; I hung on for two more in case a one-handed hold still earned me time. Looking up at the way the acrobat closed his eyes and plucked a hair from one of his eyebrows, my

guess was it hadn't. I bit my lip and tugged my own thin eyebrow in imitation; I could see my father growing concerned from where he watched us on the bleachers.

"Thank you," my father said, rising. "Perhaps we shall try the tightrope."

This option had been held in reserve because our last tightrope walker had retired over a year ago, having professed loved for one of the contortionists, who cupped the sides of her shining face between her feet to slowly shake it no. Since then, the circus had simply gone without, leaving no one to train me in the act. It would be up to my parents to oversee my instruction.

My mother strung a rope the thickness of a fist from one end of our trailer to the other. It ran 40 feet long and 1 foot off the ground. On either end, she left 3 inches slack, so the line would yield when I walked across, first gripping both my parents on either side of me, then a single arm, then only having to rest two fingers across my mother's shoulder, which held for me, steady as an ocean ledge. My parents' gentle encouragement was rewarded: At the end of a month, I was walking the length of the rope as though it were solid ground. It was, I think, a relief to us all, and so I delighted in the rope, which became my plaything; my parents had a difficult time getting me off it for dinner. On it, I was faster than they were and more agile. I'd spring across the room when they tried to catch me, but the exercise increased my agility, and ultimately proved good for my training.

I wasn't, however, a natural, and the circus's wire proved nothing at all like the rope. It was notably thinner and more stiff, and it bit the softs of my feet like a snake. Probably one time in every five, I fell. But I learned to anticipate the sensation of a fall that couldn't be corrected and, with the help of the lead acrobat (grateful, I'm

sure, not to have had to teach me trapeze), came up with a landing made to appear planned in advance. Of course, it meant I could never perform without the prop of a net, something the best artists did as an encore, perhaps with the assistance of a beautiful woman, snapping the mesh grid from its hooks with the flick of a dazzling white wrist. My performance contained none of those things. Still, I proved much better at tumbling vertically than I once had on the ground. The act was passing.

I grew. My mother provided me with some schooling that amounted to an education typical, I would imagine, of a 12-year-old. I liked to read but was worthless with figures, and my parents didn't press me to study. Neither of them had completed an education, having met and joined the show before they turned 14. My grandparents were all dead; other relatives were few and scattered, lost to married names and new addresses. I didn't give the matter much thought, our own home hovering over a map. I had never known anyone with a family tree.

On the wire, I soon taught myself how to spring onto my toes, as well as how to run backwards. By the start of my adolescence, I had added props to my act. I learned to turn the balls of my feet toward the audience, squat low over the line and juggle, though my core of balance never stabilized, and I fell about the same as before, a limitation for which I tried compensating by having the acrobat train me in a more sophisticated set of spins for my landings. I demonstrated each new trick to the ringmaster. "You're a good boy," he would say, with a compensatory pat on the back.

I passed most days in the training tent with the acrobats, who came to respect my persistence and include me in their confidence. With the obvious exception of my mother, the lead acrobat said, I was never to trust the sideshow acts. They were

faithless, he muttered if he caught sight of one, always coming and going, lazy. It was because they had their pick of the circuses, but not for any work ethic or talent, just bodies bent into some bitter arrangement that left them inwardly pickled and callused. Conjoined twins, droopy-faced dwarves and one armless woman—who used her feet to strike matches and puff on a crooked pipe—tipped or wheeled into our show and back out again in less than a month.

But then there was Esther. When she came to us, she was 15 and stunning: tall and with hips that rounded off like a heart. Curls that made you want to part through and live in them. Plump lips drooped over a cigarette. For months, I lay awake at night in my bunk, imagining those lips licking smoke past my ear.

On show days I waited to see her. Inside her tent, she groomed her beard in a tarnished mirror propped against a board. Back then, the hair covering the lower half of her face was only a few inches long, but already beginning to coil. Esther turned on a stool to select combs from a tray. Pausing at times to tap ash into a small cup, she twirled each chestnut lock around the tip of a comb. The beard shone like a spray of buds. The floor of her tent kept as clean as my mother's.

Esther didn't seek friendship from her colleagues, and the circus didn't supervise its young people. Between shows she would slip off for days at a time, or appear only sporadically, for shared meals, although she never went missing for work. In her tent I always hung back and clung to the shadows, and always awaited a small crowd before I went in. I didn't guess at how obvious I'd been until the night she appeared before me backstage, minutes prior to my own act, where I was wrapping my feet in bandages.

I looked up and started. Trapped in the ringlets sprung from her chin, the artificial fog we employed hung on her face, lending her the appearance of a beautiful ghost. She didn't speak to me, but touched a finger to each of my props, which by then had grown to include various ribbons, sabers, and two white rats I'd trained to pop from my sleeve and run around my chest and wrists while I spun hoops in the air, to amplify the dizzying effect.

I left her and rose to stand by the curtain, watching the lion tamer as he went through his routine, pacing and lashing the air with his whip. My face had gone damp, and something twitched in my knees with each snap of the tassel. I could feel Esther behind me, and sensed she didn't flinch. The lions were gathered and perched at various heights on their stools. Over the audience, the ringmaster boomed out my cue.

Backstage, I knew each cat by name, but out here light was thrown on them to make them appear larger and younger, yellow shot through the gray of their fur. They swung their necks at me as I walked by, something I'd done a thousand times before, although tonight I imagined I could hear real hunger in the smack of their chops and had to push myself on. As I turned before the ringmaster and began my ascent up the ladder, I saw Esther appear through a space in the curtain, beard throwing a tangle of shadows over her face, and my foot slipped on a rung.

On the wire, I fell very early, something I'd never done, which meant reclimbing the ladder for the second half of the act. The crowd grew restless enough for me to hear them shifting on the bleachers. There wasn't much applause after the second landing, and I dropped a club in my rush to return backstage. Esther was still there, seated on the bench.

"You weren't very good," she said, watching as I shakily unlaced my slippers.

"I'm much better, usually."

"You are," she agreed. "Usually."

This night hadn't been the first time she had watched me, only the first she had been the braver of the two of us and come forward.

Esther and I tumbled into the absorbing pattern of sweethearts without much outward preamble or fanfare. No one seemed surprised by it; we suffered no teasing or unkind asides. At the time I thought it strange my parents didn't have more to say, although I supposed that, since I maintained my training, they couldn't criticize my time spent from home in the group bunks with Esther. Though she traveled with us, in a strange way with Esther I began realizing an identity separate from the show. I had nothing to give her there; with the circus, she didn't expect to gain anything through me. Outside my own parents, I wasn't sure I knew anyone else like that. I came to depend on her, especially when, right around that same time, my mother and father began splitting off from the caravan. Between shows, they would leave with their own trailer, route their own private excursion to a nearby lake or small ocean-side town and for a few days be gone while the circus pushed on, barreling forth to its next city. There they would rejoin us, hooking back on in time for the next performance. It was previously unlike them to separate from the circus, but now our work scheduled had lightened, giving them time. When I think of my parents that year, I see them at our table, bent together over a patchwork of brochures and maps.

It was during one of my parents' brief stays away that a wave of equine anemia swept through our stables. The show horses' knees swelled overnight; by

morning, their bellies sagged to the ground, collapsing them forward in swamps of their own diseased froth. Of the twelve horses, eleven had to be shot. The horses had led our opening parade and made several appearances throughout our shows, all cancelled while we struggled to re-choreograph. Two weeks' earnings were lost to time spent recovering the routine, which didn't reincorporate the twelfth horse, who wouldn't be saddled or made to reenter the riding ring. I remember we were on the outskirts of farm country then, where we could have easily made a sale. Instead we kept him, letting him grow soft with naps and oats.

My mother especially pitied the horse. At night she sent me to take it turnips and peppermints, received from my palm with black rubbery lips, and couldn't rest easy until she knew I had gone. She had returned from vacation visibly weakened, my mother, short of breath. Most days she passed asleep in our trailer; nights she spent under siege of harsh coughing fits. I realized how, in the last year, her face and hair had grown thin. While her height hadn't diminished, she was somehow smaller in her body than she had been before.

For a full month of shows, she was too ill for most. The circus's posters featured illustrative color renderings of my mother—still, after all this time, our lead attraction. Without her, show-goers would buy tickets only to demand refunds, and what meager crowds we did manage to attract were quick to turn sour. You always had those, the people drawn to a circus not for its gifts but its grotesques, who cared nothing for us other than a place to poke the ugly snout of their scorn. There was a small fire set to one of our moving trucks at that time, and a dark figure who one night followed Esther home, flush with the stink of grease and whiskey. Our family

wouldn't let her work alone after that; she showed only while my father stood guard outside her tent.

Our sales flagged, though I was more consumed with concern for my mother, and returned home to the trailer to assist my father with the nursing. Otherwise self-possessed, he was oafish when it came to spoon feedings and sponge baths; his hands shook and his eyes slid from what he was doing. Esther volunteered help, which we needed, and didn't complain. Her kindness embarrassed us. It was a terrible time.

Aimed west, our caravan trundled through a shadowy mesh of ravines bordered on all sides by high mountains. By the time we lifted back into the sun, my mother's health had somewhat improved. She could leave bed again, and take her own food. There were days she said she felt well enough to appear in a show, more of which we scrambled to schedule. The ringmaster paced the tents, observing rehearsals. Often, he called up the tightrope at lunch, when we would retreat to his trailer to discuss trades and compare quotes for feed. "If only we could serve the clowns feed," the ringmaster scoffed. "Believe me, they'd eat it … those clowns would eat elephant if they could break the skin."

Sometimes with those lunches the ringmaster went quiet playing with his fork or pinching the folds of a napkin, and I would blow on my coffee and not rush as I sipped. I knew it took courage for him to express the thing he wanted so badly. I was patient with him. He had always been patient with me.

"You never know," he would say, casting his eyes down on the table. Beneath eyebrows that had, over time, bushed out like wool, I could still see them burning with feverish hope. What he meant was, You never know about that gene. More than

anything, what the ringmaster still wanted was a baby with scales, a tiny blue replica of my mother, marvel siren, enchantress. He wanted two of the one-of-a-kind.

"That's true," I would tell him, and refill his cup. "You never do know."

I knew the ringmaster well, and don't believe he really expected this of us. At the time I was 16, Esther a year and a half older. We were obviously too young to have children. If the circus had gone on several more years, there may have come a time to tell him, although more often, I think we'd have chosen differently and departed the circus before that time came.

There is something the ringmaster does not know. I myself did not know it until a night not long ago, one of the nights of my mother's decline. It was after my father had lain down with her for the evening, a particularly bad one: Through dinner, she had suffered a long, wrenching coughing fit, one we had tried quelling with hot water and pillows, all worthless; the fit had had to tire out on its own. From where Esther and I still sat up at the table, we could hear her trying to slip back into the thin comfort of sleep.

At the table, I remember, I was mending a patch in my bodysuit. Esther was sketching in a notepad she kept. While the lines she drew were usually fluid and sweeping, that night she kept pausing, pencil posed over the page like a question. When I looked up, she was peering at me, face drawn. I set my work aside and waited for what it was she had to tell me.

Esther can't have children. Her ovaries are pocked with cysts. It's the reason for the beard, as well. A doctor explained it to her before she came to us, with an almond-shaped model that slid apart to reveal an internal snare of ligaments and

veins. Hers—the doctor cupped the almond in the palm of his hand, as if considering its weight—soaking in the wrong kind of hormone.

Esther cried that night and lay with her arms folded over her waist. It was frightening and of adult depths neither of us knew what to make of, though through the uncertainty we could imagine some consequences. I had explained to Esther about my place in the show and the gene, though neither of us mentioned it then. I held her hands in mine and kissed the bare patch on her neck.

"It's all right," I comforted her, stroking her hair, although I had no way of knowing whether it would be.

My parents died within a week of each other, my mother succumbing to the skin disease that had wormed through a chink of her armor and festered there, locked too tight to heal with the prescribed ointments or ocean air. She went hot with fever and turned violently indigo, her scales shedding, initially one by one, then raining from her body in a drizzle of jewels.

The night she died, my father sat by the bed, running his fingers through the purple sea of scales that had bloomed around her like a bloodstain, pouring them through his fingers in a violet cascade. His knuckles were the size of golf balls, each of his wrists as thick as a thigh. My father, stacked spectacularly with slabs of muscle, knelt over my mother with no strength or summation of life. He looked to me, for the first time, heavy. When he spoke, his voice rolled from his throat like a boulder.

"Your mother was the most beautiful thing in this world, and it cast her out like a pit or a germ." He paused. "Do you know why we ran away to the circus?"

It was the first time he had ever said it that way—*ran away*. I was too afraid, even, to shake my head no.

"People spat on your mother," he said. "They flung sand in her face—she couldn't open her eye for a week. They pinned her down, pinched bits off her arms and neck until blood trickled out from under her scales. Then they ran her from town because the blood ran and stained their hands blue."

He drew a sheet over my mother, covering her bare shoulders and neck. The skin was a soft gray splashed with pink from the fever. "There's a reason we don't have a family," said my father. "But I loved your mother with a love like a family."

The next morning he was seated at his chair but wouldn't move from it. Over the coming days, I watched him sink like a stone. His face turned white, then an ancient shade of gray. He refused food and doctors. I fetched one, anyway, and returned to find him already gone, carried off by a lovesickness I suspect had been manifesting in him since my mother took ill.

I grieved my parents, then grew out of my grief. Without Esther, could I have? I had few friends and little education to speak of, no family other than the two people whose lives were so threaded through mine that I grew, even into young manhood, imagining them always within easy pull. That had been, usually, where they were.

With the loss of my parents, I had a sense of the circus, too, slipping from me. I felt now as though I was on the outside of it, harboring my secret, that I was no security for it, nor it, ultimately, for me. The ringmaster deferred to and respected my mourning, and though our friendship continued on as before, I had a quiet sense of my time there running out.

I sold the trailer, sweeping my mother's scales into a moleskin bag from which I could never bring myself to part. Esther and I went back to the group bunks, the length of her beard wrapped round the two of our bodies, its musky scent hovering over us like a private perfume. To keep my old home would have meant keeping its ghosts, the problem not being so much the ghosts as my willingness to live with the dead.

I surrendered the loss, and Esther, graciously, became my all.

For a time, unexpectedly, things got better. The country was enjoying an economic boom. Our show was not at its best but the joy then was in spending, the thrill not in us but in the buttery texture of bills, in the weight of the coins straining the stitching of pockets. Our crowds surged, and the ringmaster led us out from a large city at the height of our popularity, anticipating a return run. That was a mistake. Smaller neighboring towns weren't similarly prospering, and by the time we looped back, a blizzard had swept through the city, bringing drifts that had collapsed outlying barns and crippled their system of trains.

We went too far in before realizing the extent of the damage, and the snow held us up, too. A stale month passed over gin rummy and spades, while we fed our profits back to the place where we'd gathered them. They manufactured a strong beer there enjoyed by the clowns; the rest of us favored their mulled ciders and teas. In the evenings Esther and I took long walks that wound along the banks of the river, that season a thickly packed floor of ice. We met a young boy who taught me to skate.

Another week and the snow thinned; spring trickles began moving under the splintered rink of the river. One morning we awoke to discover the ringmaster slipped

off and made plans to move on, securing our trunks, coaxing our engines awake. It wasn't unusual for him to strike out ahead of our convoy, to scout grounds or compare route navigability, although usually he left with a small truck and this time he'd taken a large one, as well as most of the animals, the gates of whose cages swung open, complaining on their hinges.

When he hadn't returned by late morning, the day began to grow overlong, restless. A gray sun would come out, then drop down again into the clouds. From the trailers we could hear the river moaning awake, shifting and rolling under the ice, pushing up cracks through its dense glassy shell. I napped in the afternoon, waking once to find Esther asleep alongside me, a second time to find she had risen and gone. When I stepped out to look for her, the ringmaster was approaching, on foot and alone. As he neared I could see skids of red clay on his clothes, and the heels of his boots, which had been shred to stumps.

Dusk was falling. Around me, the others were coming out of their trailers, and we jostled together in a ring lit by headlights that flung shadows of our strange motley of bodies over the ground. There, the ringmaster told us what I had suspected for some time: The circus had run out of money. We were buried in debt, unreturnable favors. We'd outrun the collectors for close to a year, but, he said, holding his hands out to his sides, could outrun them no more.

The clowns glanced nervously at one another, rubbed the rounds of their bellies. The contortionists uncrossed their ankles from behind their heads and rose to stand normally—something I hadn't known they could do. I was astonished at how tall they were. The lead acrobat patted them both on the arm before turning and

walking off. The rest broke off from the circle in turn—even Esther, beard tucked down into her chest.

I stayed, lowering myself onto the steps of a trailer. In the distance, a pop sounded, and the burble of water could be heard picking up its long run downstream. The ringmaster stood off a bit, facing away in the direction of the current. I knew he was thinking, as I was, of my mother, whose body whirled with its own magical rivulets.

"My friend," I heard him say, "we would never have made it this long without her."

The sale of the animals had bought us food for the week, but most everyone was gone the next day. I don't know where they went—in pursuit of other shows, I suppose, though I doubt many had luck. In our travels we'd seen less and less of our kind over the years. Esther and I took a small apartment on the periphery of that same city, where I found a job as a clerk in a marketing office. We were lucky to have first come through with the circus. The people here understand something of us; they don't mistrust Esther's beard or our absent credit history. I don't think we expected to stay long, but we settled in more comfortably than we originally thought possible, and now, well, here we are.

I still hear from the ringmaster, who sends nondescript correspondence on notecards with no return address. He tells me he's still running, that he expects he'll be able to yet for some time, and I imagine he's right: There is no more practiced nomad than the ringmaster, who must be quite fleet, free of the weight of the caravan

dragging behind. He says he'll be back to see me someday, that he hasn't forgotten me, that he thinks of me and about my parents often. I think of them, too. I have one memory that comes to me, when my attention drifts off from a book or when I'm at work, absently filing receipts. The memory's of a morning in our trailer, and I recall it was early, the day's training not yet begun—though it was the year of the rope, I remember. It was strung through the trailer, as it always was over the course of those months, small lengths of slack pooling onto the floor. The smells of coffee and cinnamon always follow me through this memory, though they could be borrowed from another morning; there were so many like it.

This day the ringmaster was seated at our table, discussing the week's schedule or some such business with my father, while my mother prepared breakfast over the stove. I was awake with my eyes open, though still lying in bed. Unexpectedly, a large brown and white bird swooped past our window, clipping the glass. My mother jumped, then began to laugh at her jumpiness, and she had always had a beautiful laugh, soft and rich with musical charms. I went over and pressed into her side; her hand came to light on top of my head.

It was one of a thousand similar moments—between mother and child, the most natural exchange in the world. Yet when I turned back around, I saw the ringmaster quickly drop his eyes, and knew he'd been watching. He went back to the conversation with my father, but what I'd sensed then I could feel lingering for a long time afterwards. I can't point to it without question as the thing that kept us running as long as we did, pushing and pulling, our battered train lurching along under the weight of its splendors, the circus its own story of rugged hardships and luster.

Sometimes, though, I think I still sense it today, an old whiff coming through now and again in his letters, and I know, at least, it was there: that unexpressed, undeterred hope of the man's; that single wish, as stubborn and plain as a worn knot of rope.

Plenty

The ground in back of the cottage is dense with figs. I mean really dense, I mean puffed with them. It's this tall leafy fig tree that drops all its figs over the fence, over-sunned purple figs, figs fat as apples, figs that have no business being that big, popping open gummy brown at the seams. They've been dropping over like maybe it thinks anyone's gone hungry for figs, ever.

Overhead, stars pinwheel through the black gaps in the leaves and it's been so long since I pressed my whole hand to raw wood that it sparks something live in my stomach. Tree-climbing's not a pursuit I'd list on a resume but I can understand the appeal. They quiver around me like they're nervous—the figs do—and I smooth the leaves beneath me in a flared skirt that sheds a fresh rain. That tells you something: I've always been more wire than wadding and on a plant this size I barely register. In the morning when I go home I'll have to tell Bobby, maybe bring him out here sometime, not out *here* but somewhere else like it with open skies and walks that don't follow a grid. It's not per-se "natural" to go your whole life living in cubes and breathing the same churned-over air all the time and let's face it, Bobby's a lot of things but adaptive's not one of them.

I've never had a yard before. Bobby has. Before we met he had one in Virginia, even though it was xeriscaped which means instead of grass it was stone and not many fruit trees can grow in stone. I called him up earlier on the cottage phone, anyway, twisting the spiral cord up the wand of my finger. My cellphone's a

paperweight up here, almost two hours north of my apartment with Bobby, but I've decided I like landlines. I like the idea of us, me and Bobby, attached by a complicated network of wires any time I want us to be.

What I do with all these figs? I said when he picked up, not bothering to wrestle the smile out of my voice, not even bothering with hello since I knew he already knew it was me. *They have all these figs up here,* I said, watching through the window as a pile slumped over with the weight of its rot. *Live ones,* I added, for clarification, because Bobby's the literal type and always needing it. *Not Newtons. Not dried in a sleeve.*

I don't know, Tasha, Bobby said, weary. *I've never grown figs. The only yard I've had was all stone.*

You see? I know my husband so well.

Overhead, the kitchen fan whined like a dog. I held the phone up to the sound and waited for Bobby to try and guess what could be making it. Two calls before he'd said air-conditioning unit which hadn't been such a bad guess but on the next one he said weed whacker and I had to tell him he wasn't even close.

Those figs, I heard him say, voice competing with static plus the extended length of my arm, *why don't you cook something with them?* Like I hadn't already thought of that.

OK, Bobby, I said, and hung up the phone.

For six hours I've been up at this cottage where I'm supposed to be staying while Bobby and I try on a trial separation—that's how Bobby said it last week, *try on*, like the separation was a swim cap or pair of false eyelashes. I puckered my lips

and asked Bobby if he could ever love a synchronized swimmer, a question I noticed he managed to avoid by asking *me* if I couldn't try taking this seriously.

Seriously, I said, sucking in my cheeks, listing sideways with my eyes closed as I pictured myself kicking out from a bikinied starburst of sidestrokers, *how would we separate? We have one apartment, singular. Where's the other person going to stay?*

But Bobby had already thought of that. That's something I love about him, the way he's always planning ahead. My husband was an Eagle Scout in the eighth grade. He eats fiber cereal, reads the weather forecast, always contributes to his 401(k). It might not shock you to learn Bobby's a money man and in fact the cottage belongs to clients of Bobby's, an older couple he taught to know a good investment when they see one, and they saw one: a to-let for summers and holidays and trusted financial advisors whose marriages have hit a rough patch.

The best part, or what I imagine they all must have thought was the best part, was the miracle of the location. That's right—up here it's just me and them, cozied up side-by-side and no one else this face of the mountain, no other houses for miles. It's beautiful land, with enough hills to make you seasick just looking at it.

Oh, no you don't, I said, dropping the lips, snatching the real-estate flyer from Bobby the second I caught him sliding it from his briefcase. I ignored the belly sensation of my draining chlorine dream to read from the flyer to Bobby before he could read it to me. Rustic one-bedroom. Citrus orchard views. Mountain-efficiency style. On the back someone had circled the map and scribbled beneath it in sloppy block letters: AS LONG AS YOU NEED!

Bobby, Bobby, I said, smiling, tracing my finger over the flyer's raised laser-print type, noting the color quality of the photos. *You don't even* like *oranges.*

I met Bobby in traffic school. He was there for not being able to talk his way out of going four miles per hour over the limit. When I asked him why not he said he hadn't tried. He said he *was* going four over, which I said was the best thing I'd heard in traffic school and the worst thing I'd heard in life. In class he caught me copying his answers off the test, even though it should have been the other way around: His was a first offense and mine wasn't, plus my memory's terrific and I remembered all the answers from the time before. Still, nobody's ever met too many good-looking men, and cheating was my way of acting cute.

On the way out he came up to me and I could tell even that made him nervous; his bottom lip was swollen and tattered from where he'd been chewing it. *Are there any other rules,* he muttered as the class flowed out the back room and through the DMV lobby, all heads except mine bent with misdemeanant shame, *you'd like me to break for you?* It was so sweet I had to act worried, too. *Do you take bribes?* I whispered back, and started rooting around in my bag while Bobby's eyes went huge and he started to pull away.

When I fished out a Tic Tac, he pulled back, slowly, and that was the start of that.

After I hung up the phone, I crossed my arms in the window and watched myself cross them, let everything outside shift to brown lumps and green smears. I stuck a finger in my coffee and stirred it and set the cup down on the counter. I wiped out a large box I found under the sink. The cottage is three rooms on a summit

shoelaced with a switchback and has the kind of things in it you would expect. Red kettle, old bathtub, floorboards that lift and creak when you move. It's mountain-efficiency all the way.

With the box I went out through the backdoor and in the yard I had to be careful stepping over the figs, seeing how the ground was so studded with them, leaking out pulp in long, drippy cords. They fell in the far corner but had tumbled out over the rest of the lawn, which gave up the odor of eggs left out to sweat, that plus a whiff of overbaked pie. The cottage yard's small with a fence but the thought of feeling caged in is ridiculous because beyond that it's all rolling green.

At the fence I could see the top of the clients' house, which is bigger than the cottage and brown instead of blue. It's got double chimneys and glass doors, a long stone driveway curved like a tail. *You won't have a problem,* I called over, *if I pick some of these?* No one answered, but I didn't expect them to. I'd already been over to knock on the door, to flip through their short stack of mail, palming a letter from Bobby's firm because it could have been from Bobby and that belongs to me. I pet the cat, slipped its collar on over my wrist. I love the idea of real neighbors with yard space and this tree's just too much! When it comes time for me and Bobby to buy I'll remember to look for a lawn with a produce section, now that I know they're out there. I read in a recipe book fruit trees are good luck and even now I've got a gut feeling about this one, as lush as it is, as abundant and robust and enduring.

With the ground being so slippery, what with my shoes skidding around in the slick, it took a long time to pick even a few really good figs, and most of what I grabbed split open right in my hand. Bobby works but I'm in between jobs and so I

have time for things like mashing and jarring, like picking and slicking, I guess! Around me the ground gathered figs, and the figs gathered bees. I've never been scared of bees, who ignore me, but especially not those bees, who were drunk off too much extract. They weren't flying from fig to fig anymore but each worming deeper inside its own and there was something I liked about that so I took some of the ones with bees, too.

For the rest of the day I stayed in and made jam, chopping bulbs and stems and measuring sugar and water with cups. When it got dark I flipped on the radio and some lamps and because I knew Bobby was so lonely down in the city I called him up, too.

That's good, Tasha, he said. *It sounds like you've had a good day.*

Really excellent, I said, pushing a ladle around in the pot.

Did you meet Rose and Terry? While you were out in the yard.

Bobby, I said, louder, cocking my head so the receiver tilted up to the ceiling, *what do you think's making that sound?*

Lawn mower? I heard him call out over all the phone's long-distance pops and fuzz, and you've got to love him for trying, you really do have to. He paused, and the pause swelled with static. *Hair dryer? Exercycle?*

I looked down at the jam, where the bees had been boiling up in the pot, shriveled bean bodies among all the cubed and diced fig-shapes melting off in the heat. Slow-cooking's a long process, a close process—a funny fig scent filled the room, wrapping my head in sweet cloying steam—but on *exercycle* a tiny lizard

bobbed up, and I took that as a sign it was done. The lizard was still and bloat-bellied, glazed the most beautiful pink.

I skimmed the jam with the ladle and asked Bobby if I couldn't call him back, please, then filled a jar from the top shelf and wrapped it in a blue collar of ribbon I pulled from the sewing drawer, rolling my thumb over the high humped backs of the seam rippers. Last Christmas I knit Bobby a sweater vest with a white cable-pattern antelope skull and when I asked him to wear it out on New Year's he did; I have a picture of that party with everyone hoisting flutes of champagne and Bobby trying to drink his with both arms wrapped tight over his chest.

Out front I crossed the cottage grass into the clients' holding the heat of the jam close, breathing the steam that ghosted up and clung to my face. I wouldn't have passed on a shower if I had one and on my way up the curved drive I thought about my bag still unpacked in the bedroom, blue and slouched over a toothbrush and one change of underwear I packed so Bobby would see me and think he was making his point.

Here, puss-puss-puss, I called out on my walk round the drive, nothing sinister, just being neighborly even though I knew the neighbors aren't home. I set the jar down at their door and watched the breeze carry off some of the steam; it squeezed over the railing but I could tell it picked up from there from the sound the wind made moving through the trees.

The night air felt good after all that time in the kitchen so I ignored the chill and sat down next to the stairs on the porch. In my back pocket I still had the letter from Bobby that when I tore open turned out not to be from Bobby at all but a

supervisor of Bobby's who always talks at the fundraisers with square teeth and suspicious hair parted too close to the ear. In my hand his letter was all pie charts and bar graphs that didn't make sense, although the fattest slice of pie made some. I hadn't eaten all day. I must have passed thirty farm markets on the drive up here but didn't stop once because I'm a light eater and can subsist on a box of Ritz crackers for a week. Now, though, I was picturing those markets' wide wood-slatted pear crates, their buckets of Golden Delicious and weight-splintered baskets of nectarines. The thought of all that fruit made my mouth water and I remembered I was practically sitting on top of a wellspring of it. It had been twenty years since I last climbed a tree but you don't need a slideshow to suss out the basics: I'm a third of the way up by the time the car headlights are swinging onto the street.

I don't panic, if that's what you're thinking; my pulse picks up but that's because my heart's racing with the rush of all this life at my fingertips. The lights sweep the base of the tree, which is tucked behind the house but only just, and something about how close those lights come makes me forget for a second I want to be up here—makes me feel for a second like I'm *hiding* in their tree—but then I decide not to feel that and keep going. It's not til I'm swinging round the thickest midsection of leaves when I hear it—the shatter of glass, an automated whirring—and guess both right, first try: jam jar, breaking; car window, rolling down.

What the hell? an older man calls out. The car engine cuts at the same time two doors push open, fall closed. *What's he got there?* I push up a step higher and catch a glimpse of the cat, pinned in the headlights next to a confetti of torn mail, pink lizard slung and dripping from its mouth.

What is this? This time it's a woman's voice, punched through with the sound high heels make on porches. *Is this jam?*

In case you're wondering, I don't forget what I came for. I'm not the kind of person who waits and in my mouth the fig's all clashing walls of texture and flavor I don't try to hold onto because there's so much of it you could never run out. There's something lewd about that kind of plenty, about spilling into other people's yards and private lives without asking, plus it's not hard to give freely when you need a break for your arms. The fig's good but not in the way you usually think of good and that makes it better; using both fists I chase the first with a second that's better and a third that's even better than that. It's vulgar, all this overripe fruit in my face, but I want it all anyway because they should have to know that kind of trespass.

It is *jam*, the woman's saying. *But what's in it?* Her voice is furry with a hundred hairline cracks but they're the good kind that come from too much laughing and schnapps mixed with wine. It's warm and boozy—it probably tells a good joke—and I know that sort of voice, I've told a joke or two in my day. *An antelope skull walks into a bar*. I remember how last New Year's Bobby wanted to leave early and I wouldn't, even though the champagne was flat and the TV screen was small and as far as parties go it wasn't so hot. There was one point when the host had us trapped in her kitchen; there were plenty of people but she'd wanted us and whatever she had to say, there was too much of it. We must have stood there for fifteen minutes on mute and I remember Bobby had one of his hands round his back and I began to pinch the pads of the hand, nothing hard, just little soft pinches in a row rolling back and forth over his palm. It was a game to play while the host went on about canapé recipes or

the men she was dating online and when she said something funny, like how the lemon-zest garnish complemented the microgreens, I'd pinch harder, and when she said something really funny, like how the men on dating sites struck her as erudite and self-knowing, I'd pinch really hard. That's probably the best thing about Bobby and me, our secret jokes, like how for Christmas I'd slipped a box of Tic Tacs down the neck of the sweater and when he unwrapped it he found them and smiled.

Finally the phone rang and she swept off to answer it, though by then I was feeling pink and exhilarated and actually thinking the scene had picked up a little til Bobby turned and asked why I'd been doing that to his hand.

I was playing, I told him. *It was funny. The stuff she was talking about it—didn't you think it funny? It couldn't have hurt.*

It hurt, he said. *Some of them hurt.*

I shrugged. *So next time move your hand.*

You've got a pretty good grip.

Do you want to pinch me? Here, go ahead—pinch me.

He took a step back. *I'm not pinching you, Tasha.*

You can if you want to—look, I said, pinching, but Bobby had already turned from the room.

Suddenly I'm sick of the feel of too much food in my mouth. I run my tongue around the rim of my gums, collect the fig seeds, spit them out. I call out *up here,* not because I know they'll find me soon but because I want to make sure they do. Itchy scabs of bark bite my palms, and my legs are tired from all this swinging down. Below me the ground's moving, shadow on shadow. Something dark shuffles over

the lawn, quick and low to the ground, all flat ears and singularity of direction. You can tell it's headed for some survivalist need, to eat or to hide, to snout out a place for itself in a nest of other flat shady things. I hear it get closer and as it passes the tree, I feel the line of space shrink between us, before pulling out into an overlong, thinning string.

Retrieval

When Mary sits alone at her table, when she thinks house, she thinks *house*, not wind crackling round roaring chimney-hearth fires or dinner with vegetables softened with butter. When she thinks roach, she thinks *roach*, not pale-glistening egg sacs or fallen dead dusted wings, but the exact way a roach looks by her foot on the floor. Mary can't remember how she came to be in the old house. She knocks around in it, sitting on kitchen chairs, gazing out windows, picking up a pepper mill and setting it back down. She traces the sun's arc over the day, the shimmery river of moon through nights. Mary knows the ways of staying, of staying perfectly, not shifting or aging or growing more or less comfortable. Flux swirls around her, time and air, stubby fans of cockroaches that march through the hems of her skirts with feelers that hum messages back to their brains. *All clear*, the feelers hum when brushing past Mary. The roaches spill over the floor like ink over water, into holes in the baseboards, up walls. To vanish: a wonder, however brief. Most things Mary doesn't remember for long.

Mary's house sits by a woods with leaves crippled brown in the months leading to winter. Excepting Mary, all of the rest leads to winter, too. The days grow thinner, the moon streams longer, skidding pearl across the sky. Along the slim dips of ground, a spread of decay lifts and resettles, rubbing out any footpaths that point through the trees. In some ways the same, the path Mary took has long since faded, shifted apart. Likely the instant she stepped off of it, falling apart at the lift of her weightless foot. They come and go, these paths. Mostly go.

The house stays, having bulged and sunk into its plot of earth. Its sags with the weight of all its passageways, which spread through the house like a great clump of roots. Mary can sense the drop of the house, and drops with it.

Topping the house, rows of weather-pocked tiles cascade down the roof, eaves over the front door peaking like a prayer. Inside, rust blooms around the base of a bathtub. Hairline fissures trickle down from the ceiling, shrugging up ripples of gooseflesh under the wallpaper.

The outer doors bang against the empty shells of their frames. The cockroaches come and go as they please.

At dawn, the earliest fingers of light reach across the woods to stroke the seams of the house awake. Sun frosts the kitchen frozen-butter white before thawing yellow and starting its slow melt down the room. When the light touches Mary, it doesn't pinch the points of her eyes, or pool in the coves of her collarbone.

Mary goes drifting through the halls. In a big house like this one, it would be easy to forget why she's in a room or at the top of the stairs, or her way up, or down. It's been easy before. Motive passes through Mary like a thin curl of air, although this morning there's the matter of the whistling. It's a long enough song, or one stuck on a loop, reminding Mary, pulling her along.

She doesn't carry protection. She's not afraid. There's nothing for her to be afraid of.

Mary peers from an upper window out at the lawn. There's a man down there, with a car that's sliced long tracks up the grass. The man doesn't come in the house,

only paces before it, throwing up glances, mouth packed in a tight, musical O. Before he leaves, Mary sees him jot a few notes.

The first man comes back with a second, and together they do come in, flinging wide curtains and screwing in light bulbs. The second man whisks out dirt with a broom. He knocks white spider nests from high corners and bookshelves and works on the doors, lifting strike plates and replacing old tumblers. When he's done, the men go away and bring back a woman. She stares up at the house while the men make eager gestures with their hands, all of them pointless; she's not watching their hands.

Papers are exchanged. Keys. The men depart in their cars. The woman enters through the front door alone. She redraws the drapes and dims the lights. She sits cross-legged on the floor. Then she stands, dusts herself off, and quietly commences with living there.

Here are the things the woman contains herself to: simple tasks. A garden, a journal. Tending her orange cat. She makes a living carving soaps and selling them at markets. There are tulips, some hummingbirds, a chubby blue sousaphone. None of them leaves a trace. The woman collects the soap shavings into a soft ball that dwindles to a faint scent, then nothing at all.

The woman's cat slinks after Mary like a tidy penumbra. It traces her with its persistent cat scent, a slipknot on a loose, invisible cord, one Mary can smell filling up the rooms.

The woman doesn't mind the house, when elements in its wallpaper rearrange themselves, or when water from its faucets forks in midair, splitting to form two streams down the drain. When she moves something to the wrong place, Mary moves it back. The woman scratches the side of her face and bends over her work, scooping the shape of a goldfish scale with her scalpel. She brushes her teeth in the mirror and wipes the suds from her mouth on her hand, then stays up late, pulling the small bumps of a face from a bar. Mary goes through the woman's journal and reads some of the poems. There's a sonnet about winter, a few quatrains about soap and a rondeau about a garden that sounds a lot like the garden outside. The ink lets over the page like spilt berry juice. By the last line the page has turned to a dried leaf in her hands.

The final thing the woman brings with her is a lover, a tall man with brown hair and pronounced shoulder blades. At first, the lover's contained, too—to evenings, to the occasional heart sketched in the margin of a page. The lover cooks tall pots of stew with tomatoes that crease and slump in the heat, the smell winding through the kitchen like a vine of pipe smoke. He builds the woman a workstation. A fine film of sawdust settles over the downstairs, collecting various tracks that cross and weave a carpet pattern of time.

The lover loves the woman. They make love. In the woman's bedroom, or downstairs on nights she can't coax a start from the furnace and it's too cold to sleep on the second floor with the drafts. He spreads out quilts on the ground. She builds a fire, nudging the balled-up newspaper with tongs.

The woman undresses and pulls the lover's robe to his hips. She presses her cheek against a pad of his back. The lover covers the woman's shoulder with his mouth, runs his tongue up a tendon of her neck. He cups the back of her head and angles it to expose the long line of her jaw. They cast a flock of shadows that grow, with the fire, as big as the room.

On the ground the woman's bottom ribs form an arch like a wingspan. Her ankles hook around the lover in a pink and white clasp.

Next to them, Mary sits at the workstation. She feels up its drawers, over its beveled lines. She turns the workstation's wooden knobs in her hands. On its counter she pushes around small piles of sawdust. The cat tongues its fur at her feet, tail rolled up in a fat ginger coil.

The woman works. She draws and she shapes and she carves. Her soaps are the woman's best-loved, lavished things, drawing envy from the lover, who hides it, and the cat, who doesn't, who winds through the woman's legs, crying and rubbing itself over her stool til the lover comes and scoops it away. This morning she carves two turtles, a gramophone. Only Mary stays with the woman, abiding the shapes that lift and sink around her, observing the shift of their rise and fall. It's a pattern like snowdrifts, like the figures whose shadows move behind Mary's eyes.

After the gramophone the woman does a set of six dominoes, details a rocking horse, and starts work on an oyster with pearls. By the third pearl the sun's slung high in the sky. Mary rises and sniffs. She remembers the cat, absently, who she can still smell—only just. She pushes the door open, listens, and walks through.

Upstairs she finds the cat in the attic, curled between two windows whose panes are popped from their frames. The lover's pulled himself halfway out through one of them, boots hanging down against the bare posts inside. A rhythm of stuttered clangs, metal pounding on metal, rings through the roof.

Mary swivels her head out the second frame. The cut of sun and cold is a stun. To her left, the lover's face is creased with focus. He's biting down on a cracker of black tiles. In his hands a hammer's throwing up hard flashes of light.

She pulls back and stands limply inside the room, the chill and light pricking spots on her face. The cat opens one of its eyes and flicks its tongue in a bored yawn. Mary thinks the cat thinks she's stupid. She's not stupid. She fastens the frame into the heel of her palm and steps into the space, spanning it with her shoulders and hips. She intends to ease into the curl, but the wind instantly catches the small of her back and lofts her like a sail. She hovers in her moment of surprise before crumpling like a spent parachute, then swiftly fills back up with air.

Mary swells, triumphant, back out into the blue. The breeze lifts her hair and fans air onto her scalp, cooling and warming something akin to the feeling of skin. Sunlight folds her into an embrace loose enough to let her body breathe like that, with blow and heat. It blooms soft colors inside her. Mary follows the course of the sun as it bends across the sky, the lover doing his work alongside her. The light flushes her with fervor and shine. It is, she thinks, really something.

After an hour, she senses a chill and opens her eyes on a field of clouds tumbling in toward the house. She cuts a stronger curve in the wet-smelling wind. Above her, the clouds muscle and bruise each other for room, turning from gray to a

dark, heavy lead. Fog curls up from the ground, swirling around Mary's knees and squeezing the loaves of her thighs. She turns to look at the lover, the sweat rolling off the blunt tip of his nose, down the grooved lines of his mouth and eyes. He doesn't seem to have noticed the sky, and Mary grinds deeper into the corners of the frame.

The wind plucks at Mary, snapping her hair and her hemline, hoisting and flapping her thin and diaphanous. When the rain comes it pelts wicked bolts of steel and pleasure that roll her eyes back in her head. Mary beats off the house like a flag. Behind her she can feel it, the house, all three stories crowned with the attic, and by god she was proud of the attic, wasn't she, the way it went up last and made the house look like it was rolling on its hat. Yes, and it had rained then too, rushing the men, sending them running for their hats and tools, a race to the finish after so many exacting months of plans that had to be erased and redrawn, remeasured and repriced, the support beams, the balustrades, all of them sketched, each of their places notched in the floor.

Then the trenches, turned up with hoes. Then the lumber, rolling over the hills in high muddy waves.

Then it rose up. Mary's house. It rose up.

It will be a long night. More rain is coming. Already it's pushing in, an impossible bluff, heavy sheets of water moving in off the trees, gusts that whip up bulleting twigs and ripped leaves. A few birds will nip out from the woods, dazed or restless or hungry, and the water will drive them heavily forward. Some of the birds will manage to beat back to the trees. Others will be left to jockey the current, to angle as best they can and pitch for the house, darting in to wing up to the ceiling, to

the top of the cast-iron chandelier. One bird will smack its body through a window, leaving a bird-sized hole in the pane, dropping for the cat to drag it to the fireplace and throw soot over its body, its broken neck.

And yet before this, before the soot-buried bird's heart flickers out, before its brothers fling around the grand room, dropping dirt and shadows over the floor, diving through the chandelier and disrupting the moths, which will rise tacitly to form hovering, gray hoops—before any of this—Mary twists and snaps in the sky, and it's thrilling, is what it is.

In the morning, the lover walks through the house, checking for anything that looks suspicious or unsafe.

"What's this?" he asks the woman of the hole in the window, and the woman says she doesn't know. She has to repeat herself over the birds, who are preening themselves, squawking and clucking from their roost on the mantel.

The lover goes out. He brings back a series of complicated locks for the house. He bolts the windows and strings the doors with thick chains.

The woman protests; she feels caged in.

"I'm sorry," says the lover, snapping a brass padlock in place. "But we just can't take chances."

It's there in the middle of the room, its once-level, once-sand-smoothed counter plank pitched in like a split vessel, the flat board collapsed steeply in on itself in a V. The workstation's left legs are split, too, so the whole structure lists to the

side, looking seasick. Seasick and furry. The wood splits are furry. Not the work of an axe, or delayed byproduct of sloppy, ill-conceived carpentry.

No, that much was clear: The workstation was well made.

All three of the splits look like someone picked the wood apart, splinter by splinter. With their fingernails, or their teeth.

Mary and the lover take up the house separately, moving furniture, moving their hands over walls. The lover repairs storm damage to the windows and eaves. He massages the house's rim locks with grease, runs tape over the hardwood stripes on the floors. He brings a heavy locked chest to squat inside the front door. Mary works upstairs in the far bedroom, pulling a desk from a corner, slotting a chest of drawers into place, gripping and lifting stacks of old boxes. At night she rests in a corner, lowering her gossamer heart to a hum. When she stirs in the morning, she knows just how the desk and drawers and boxes should be.

Downstairs the lover takes apart slats from the workstation.

The woman goes out and the birds follow her out. She brings in fat vegetables pulled from the garden. She starts a new journal and hums at the stove. She carves a bouquet of hydrangeas that smell just like hydrangeas, each bigger and more beautiful than the one before.

The ground outside starts to soften and shift; worm loosen the loam as they thaw and stretch for new spring.

In the bedroom, Mary picks through a vanity containing razors and a toothbrush. The razorblades slide from their cartridges; the grizzled bristles pluck

neatly from the brush head. When Mary works, she sees light and smells grass-smells. She hears the low echoing babble of her own singing voice, an old Easter hymn, yes, she could sing. The vanity, she recalls, was kept clean. The hymn verses float over the trod of the lover's boots in the hall, snatching higher and louder, like dry leaves caught in a breeze. Downstairs she picks at the tape on the floor.

Mary picks at the lover. When the lover's in a room by himself, the lights might buzz and dim orange. Sometimes there's scratching from inside the wall next to his side of the bed. Once Mary makes the lover's bath go cold; a thin crust of ice forms a ring around the edge of the tub, the smudge of a handprint appearing over the freeze. Traces of fingertips dance away from the print in a row of discs no bigger than dimes.

But the lover is calm-natured. He tinkers with the sprig of wires poking out of the fuse box and never hears the night scratching; the lover rolls over toward the woman in his sleep. Before even noticing the film of ice in the bathwater, he stands and rubs himself dry, then pads downstairs to check the pipes for the heat.

The lover and woman are common. They take of each other's knitwear and body heat. In their sleep they fit like a pair of fingers crossed for luck. They share food, comforts, taste. Blame, the evening the locked chest comes unlocked, when the lover lifts up its contents, long ragged blades, mallets the size of small casks. Mary isn't to see, but to later imagine: the lover bringing his worst mallet to a bare spot on the house—the briefest light touch, chilled with indifference—before flinging back and slamming into the wall.

The blows come like the bongs of a clock, the first rolling up the frame of the house, the second shaking her down to the floor. Upstairs, Mary holds over the floorboards. Bedroom doors open onto bouncing bedclothes, onto windows raining with dry mud and small rocks jumped from the gutters. The ceiling spits paint chips; shelves loose whole encyclopedia sets, torrents of hardbacks spilling over the walls. A year passes, the house sinks—or it bobs up and it's not yet been an hour. Downstairs there's a great crack, a long rip, a rumble that drains away into a few grunts and some crumbling and it's only later, much later, after the lover's come up in his heavy way, the woman following on the dry pads of her feet, after they've gone into their room and shut the door, that she can bear to get up to go see.

The staircase floats in a white fog that laps at the landing and wraps up the posts of the banister. The downstairs furniture is suspended in a thick-knit moving mist. Tools spike out of the house and parts of the house that aren't the house anymore. Where there were two walls, twin piles of rubble run with dribbling plaster slips.

Next to one of the piles, Mary holds out a hand and catches the plaster, watching it spill through her fingers and bleach the ground where it pours. This was her living room, her beautifully squared room just for living. Where Mary lived. Fit low tables in place. Selected antiques. Touched lamps, a green fringe lamp that caught dirt and Mary had to wipe clean strand by strand, worth it for the warm glow it cast on her reading nook.

Mary backs from the room. Her petticoats hiss as they kick left and right down the hall. Their ruffles trap air and conspiracy in the flight through the house; the whole of Mary's skirt balloons with speculation.

She blows straight through the kitchen, up through the chimney's three stories, expelling a low baritone moan. Beneath her the heartbeat of the house drops to a slur, the soot below quivering in a flat wreath of vibrations. An iron screen skitters across the surface of the hearth, where dust mites shudder up from the rug and hang loose over the ground.

Mary moans through and through, sinking her whole self into the resonance, letting the chord of pitch pour through her core. She comes undone—her hair at first, then fingernails, teeth, her gangly blue tongue. She comes back together again. She loses place in that moan. If time weren't already lost on her, she would lose time, too.

With her eyes closed, Mary sees the house clearly, all its space plain to her, walls slid away, every part of the place available to her at once. She can move through and touch things and put things back down. She feels heat off the three bodies, two upstairs, a smaller one slinking in off the parlor. The heat guides her, along with the absence of heat; each body moves in a way she already knows that it will. Turn in bed, folded arm, lifted paw. Life unfolds like a letter written a long time ago, and in this way, it's as if it was already done.

When it is finished, she squats next to the bird. All that looks down at her is a vacant pillar and a swirl of white embers, kicking up in a lonely, conical stream.

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The next morning, it's the woman who sees it. If it were the lover, he would rush to hide it somehow, to clean it up. But it's not, and so it's the woman who gets the first full look.

The skin of the cat's split lengthwise down the belly. It's slumped in a pile of unmistakable intention at the foot of the front door, a clump of entrails leaking out the slit. Watery light reflects off a thin skin on the blood. On the cut, black clots glisten like a purse of wet raisins.

One of the cat's eyes is open. It stares past the woman, past the scalpel unconsciously kick-spun under the sofa, at Mary, a thimbleful of glassed-over milk.

The dead cat, at last, spooks the woman. She covers her face with her hands and cries. When the lover finds her, he soothes her, but his brow is marbled with worry. All the hard humor is leaked from his eyes. After he sends the woman away, his hands shake with a cigarette while the blood gloms and dries in a bruise on the floor.

The lover scoops the cat in a sack and carries it out to the woods. He wipes up the blood and dusts the soiled spot with powder. He washes his hands and splashes his face with water, then stays with the woman, bringing her blankets and tea, spiking his own cup with a shot of dark rum. He takes the woman a tray with sandwiches. Mary listens to them moving upstairs, distributing themselves, imposing their sounds and their weight.

It was some good powder the lover used. After a few days the bloodstain lifts like a cloud. Outside the lover lays poison and spades up the woman's blackberry

bush, relocating it to a far hill. He caps the chimney for raccoons and other capable vermin. Pretty soon he and the woman forget to avoid stepping on the spot where the bloodstain used to be.

The lover fills the house. He pushes the woman's things around to make room for his—suitcases, cookbooks, a chair made from a tree. Around them, the dust resettles and shifts. The lover redoubles his labor, tearing down stairs, then building them back up in a spiral curling off in the wrong direction. In the kitchen he jimmies the stove from the wall and pries the wood slats from the floors. In the walls he feels his way vent to vent, rooting out copper hosing and wires, grubbing for every last bright duct and tube.

The dust breeds and develops different colors of layers. It clots the light, lays white in the divide of the woman's red hair.

Mary goes thin in the dust. She thins as it thickens, all the parts of her house swirling past. She moves in as it moves out and it moves out all the time. Mary is thin as *that*, then she is thin as *that*. She ducks breezes blown up by power tools, shrinks into loose bricks and nickel-sized knots in the wood. Still, the lover, he always comes around soon, swinging a paint bucket or pliers.

She grows tired.

The air warms. In the house, the smell of sweat braces, bloats and contracts. The woman opens the doors and lets in breeze from the garden. In the end, it's as simple as that: A door opens, the night's warm. The woman coughs, a slight wheeze that scoops Mary's feet from the ground, nudging her toward the twist of stars and black trees.

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Up ahead, the trees toss their heads, haughty girls. Mary floats over a serpentine maze of roots, passing anonymous stripes of tree bark. A quilt of fog twirls at her feet. It drains from her, all of it. There's the flash of an orange tail, a final dim flare of fury. Then they're gone, and the tug of even the vaguest direction goes slack.

The sun sets and rises a number of times. She comes to a small cave, settles in, falling into a routine that feels natural to her, keeping track of the globes in the sky, the slow-moving mobile of shapes overhead.

To the right of her cave is a dry drizzle of rock. To the left she can see the speck of a house, one with a steeply pitched roof and glossy stacks of tall windows drawing glare off the sky.

The cave spills out toward the edge of the woods, where a pair of car tracks sweeps the rim of the trees. The tracks blacken or fade, see more or less use. The ground shuffles over them with fresh dirt and decay. The tracks set and they lift, come and they go.

Security Measures

On the ride to their new school, Marcus and Optimus always choose to sit at the front of the bus. They pick the front not because Marcus is scared of sitting in back. He and Optimus know that's what the boys in back think, probably, that Marcus is scared, of them, of the new school, of all the houses on the way to the new school that are so hedgy and high … but none of that's true. Marcus and Optimus pick the front *because* it's unpopular, because no one else ever wants to sit up there with them.

Good, Marcus is glad. Optimus is glad. It's all the better for the two of them.

Because for Marcus to save a seat for Transformer robot Optimus Prime in the row directly behind him—and it has to be the row *directly* behind him, Optimus likes it that way—it's easier on a less crowded part of the bus. Even at 8 years old, even with his best friend Optimus at his side, it could be tricky telling a boy from their new school to keep off a seat the boy wanted. Not that it'd be any skin off Marcus's nose. Off Optimus's. Marcus would tell him, all right—for the boy's own good, because Lord Primus only knows what Optimus would do, what Optimus is capable of. Could be capable of. If he really had to be. Marcus knows Optimus doesn't want trouble, but if trouble comes looking—well, that's what Optimus is there for in the first place.

The two of them, Marcus and Optimus, hunker down on the bumpy ride to school. The slope of their jostling shoulders is exactly the same, Optimus mirroring Marcus's body position and posture, only more robotic, and bigger, much bigger.

Marcus stares out the lower half of his window. Rising high over the streets swirling toward school are houses guarded with iron-gate fences and bushy rose hedges. The vines of the hedges wrap around the iron slats, pushing over and under and filling in all the gate cracks. Those houses don't look so high, thinks Marcus, they are not so nice or safe. Marcus thinks, my apartment building is higher *and* it has taller gates *and* security cameras that swivel and blink like robots. So.

Behind him, rising high over Marcus, Optimus looks straight ahead, always with one glinting gold eye on Marcus.

Two weeks ago, Marcus tried to sit in the back of the bus. It was his first day. He was new.

Marcus had counted steps on the walk to the bus stop. He counted Optimus's—for every step Marcus took, it was really two. On the bus he kept going, shuffling even numbers in his head down the aisle. At the back of the bus all the back seats were taken, but only one to a bench when there could have been two. Marcus waited, holding the last number in his mind like a rhyme, or a rule.

No one moved. After a minute there was nothing to do but turn and subtract by one's back to the front of the bus, where Optimus, it turned out, was stuck still trying to cram the steel box of his body into the frame of the folding Plexiglas door. It wasn't Optimus's fault, forgetting to turn sideways and stoop. He was tired. He and Marcus had stayed up most of the night before, talking and wondering about the new school. Marcus wondered whether or not there would be a math club, one with lots of word problems and puzzles. Optimus said he hoped the math club had a Rubik's Cube.

Today at school, Marcus's teacher springs a multiplication pop quiz on the third grade. Most of the room groans, but Marcus and Optimus don't mind. Optimus whispers the times-sevens to Marcus, the robot's heavy, shape-shifting shoulders creaking as he leans down to mutter into Marcus's ear. *Seven times two is fourteen*, Optimus says. *Seven times seven is forty-nine*. Marcus nods, carefully scratching the digits onto the page with a pencil. Marcus and Optimus know their multiplication. Math is their favorite shared subject. Their math workbook is their favorite book. Marcus and Optimus like how, from just one number—seven plus seven, seven times seven, seven times seven times seven times seven—new and more powerful figures can be formed; how, from the pivot of a sum or rotator cuff, a whole range can rise up, a great mass, swift and spiraling heights.

Secretly and only ever when he's alone with Optimus, only late at night when the two of them are staring up at the peeling plastic stars the last tenant left stuck to Marcus's ceiling, Marcus has wondered what new strengths he would acquire, if he, Marcus, were multiplied. Would Marcus times two have friends on the school bus? A seat saved for him every morning in back? Would Marcus times Marcus—Marcus himself squared—grow up to live in a big house with roses? Their teacher just taught Marcus's class the meaning of "squared" last week. Marcus and Optimus liked it very much.

At lunch the back of the bus reorganizes in sunken huddles around tables. At his own table Marcus sits one seat from the end, ensuring Optimus the spot next to him on the bench, when he wants it. Marcus chews his reduced-cost bologna and cheese. Optimus doesn't have to eat. He uses the time to do calisthenics in the clear

area by the cafeteria wall, performing squats and a series of leg thrusts, stepping into and out of his alternate diesel-truck shape.

At the end of the week, Marcus's teacher gives back the quizzes. Marcus knows he has earned one-hundred percent. One hundred times one hundred, Marcus thinks. He has never scored anything less than perfect in math.

"Marcus," his teacher says, smiling as she hands him his paper.

"*Marcus*," comes a voice from the back of the class, but the way they say it is not Marcus plus Marcus. It's Marcus divided. Marcus diminished.

Last week on the playground, Marcus and Optimus were arranging sticks and rocks by the jungle gym. They were making their own made-up word problem. Marcus had just finished sorting the rocks—Optimus had just finished counting out sticks—when a third-grader came running after a flyaway soccer ball that bounced the sticks under the monkey bars and sent the rocks soaring straight up in the air. Optimus sprang up after the sticks. A rock fell and hit the side of Marcus's head.

Half the third grade was weaving up the field for the goal by the time Optimus reappeared, stick-less, ducking through the ladder shape of the slide. They had better start over, Optimus told Marcus. He pointed to a girl who at that moment was jumping from the monkey bars, landing expertly, exploding to smithereens a large fraction of their intended component sum. On his ear Marcus still has the small, rock-colored bruise.

Today, in the front seat on the bus ride home from school, Marcus leans over his times-seven quiz. In the seat behind, Optimus leans over Marcus. The weekend

goes by. The quiz slips to the bottom of Marcus's backpack and there becomes a crushed paper fan.

On Monday morning, Marcus and Optimus keep bent over their shared desk. Marcus copies cursive script from the blackboard and writes his spelling words in a notebook. He slips his fingers through red and blue finger-paints. There is lunch, then there is the playground. On the playground Marcus and Optimus skirt the soccer game, walking the long way around the edge of the woods. The woods are thick with waist-high weeds and quiet with tall, shaggy trees. They're good for working ahead in Marcus's math workbook, which he carries with him behind the two braiding teams.

In the woods Marcus and Optimus pick a clear, flat patch of grass to work through the workbook's front-end sum estimation problem set.

"How to estimate a sum by front-end estimation," Marcus reads aloud from the workbook.

"Add the digits of the two highest place values," Optimus singsongs, pacing in a circle over the clearing. "Insert zeros for the other two place values."

By the time they've reached the end of the set, the sun has come out and is beating down on them through the trees. Happiness is this: feeling flushed and accomplished, clever and thirsty. Marcus leaves Optimus in charge and walks back to school for a drink from the drinking fountain.

Out on the field, one of the teams has scored a goal. A group of boys by the far net is cheering and popping up from their legs to bounce off one another's chests. They ignore Marcus harder, if that's possible. *Insert zeros for the other two place values,* Marcus hums through his teeth into the cool pulse of the water. He

concentrates on pulling the water into his mouth and ignores the other boys right back.

On the way back Marcus sticks out his hand, spreads his fingers and feels the flutter of air and brown leaves. Next up is front-end estimation of differences, he thinks. After that, addition with decimals. Marcus arcs his neck to look up at the sky. It's a beautiful day, light and playful and good. The dry thrill in his hand runs straight up through his arm to his chest.

Marcus looks up and sees he's slipped into the woods, walked past the grassy clearing and has to walk back. It's not far. He calls out for Optimus, who doesn't answer, then circles back, paying closer attention. At the clearing, he double-checks to make sure this is where he left them. Optimus is missing. The workbook is missing, too.

Marcus circles trees and pries up flat slabs of stone. He picks through a bush. He jams his hand in a hole made by an animal.

Nothing. The workbook's a zero times zero. Gone.

Marcus stands up and stares out at the soccer field. The players have stopped chest-popping over the goal. The game's going on like it was before.

If he could, Marcus would ask somebody for help, but the rules are he's not supposed to go into the woods, even a little bit. He can't believe it's just vanished. Marcus's workbook had all his math homework in it for the next month, at least. All the answers. He left Optimus in charge for a reason. Where's he supposed to get a new workbook, a new third-grade math workbook that costs nine dollars and forty-nine cents? Marcus's head swims with divisors, great glowing stacks of bologna and

cheese. He can't ask for it back. He doesn't even know who took it. Marcus looks back at the soccer game, fists cold and empty at his sides, before swinging around at the sound of rustling. There's Optimus, emerging from the woods, brushing dirt and ants from his hands.

"Where did you *go*?" Marcus asks angrily, even though Marcus already knows where he went. Sometimes Optimus gets distracted outside, by the mechanical, chugging sound of a car, or the look of a jolty, angular bird. Ants Optimus likes in particular; he's spent whole afternoons playing with ants, admiring how protective they are, how metallic and strong.

"I got distracted," says Optimus. "Sometimes I get distracted outside."

Marcus pushes past Optimus, letting the woods' high weeds slap his stomach and thighs. He doesn't care anymore about the rules. The rules are Optimus is supposed to protect him, and where was Optimus that day on the bus? Where was he on the playground with those flying rocks?

Now here comes Optimus, crashing through the woods, snapping through snares of branches and vines. There's grunting, and the sound of wet growth smacking into the robot's heavy, dual-cylinder chest. Marcus picks up the pace, bobbing beneath low-hanging tree limbs and lunging across mud puddles. He jumps over a small hollow, knowing it's hard for Optimus to jump. Things Optimus is good at: math, being powerful, avenging Lord Primus. Diesel trucks aren't built for high-impact exercise.

Marcus checks over his shoulder, where Optimus is lagging behind. Their walk is a multipart equation he can see stretching out behind them, over the length of the forest: minus two, minus two, minus two, minus two.

"Come on!" Marcus yells back. "Let's get out of here."

Optimus stops to scrape a clump of moss from his leg. He's taking forever. Marcus falls back and starts lightly kicking the backs of Optimus's knees, something he once saw a boy at his last school do, to a girl who had cried and fled up a plastic tunnel to hide.

"Hey!" says Optimus, sinking a little with each step, each kick. "Cut that out!" He starts walking faster, though.

Marcus kicks harder, only a little, keeping close behind Optimus. "Why didn't you watch my workbook?"

Optimus turns to glare back at Marcus. He swipes at Marcus's foot but misses. "Why did *you* bring your workbook outside?"

Marcus considers this, still kicking. The kicks aren't making him feel any better. If anything, each kick makes him feel a little bit worse, a little angrier at Optimus. Why wasn't Optimus there for him? Why does he have to screw up like this? By now the whole soccer field's probably copied Marcus's answers. By now his teacher's probably found his ripped-apart workbook and is angry with Marcus for being careless with school supplies. What will the boys on the bus have to say? Marcus kicks harder. Optimus bucks deep in the knees.

Marcus says, "I don't know why I bring *you* outside."

“I like it outside,” says Optimus. “I like birds, I like ants. I can spend whole afternoons playing with ants, admiring—”

Marcus shoves Optimus forward with both hands. He hits the ground, a spray of mud splashing up in his face. It feels strange but good to see Optimus sprawled out in a crooked heap, even if Marcus does feel a little bad about the mud.

For a minute, facedown, Optimus doesn’t move. Marcus couldn’t have hurt him. Optimus is Galactic Leader of the Autobots. Marcus is just a little kid. He can’t even climb the rope for gym. On rope day he has to just cling to it, legs clenched in a pretzel, til the gym teacher tells him thirty seconds have passed and he can get down.

All the same, it’s a relief when Optimus stirs.

“Well, now I’m not getting up,” Optimus says.

“Oh, yes, you are,” says Marcus. “We’re going home. We can’t stay in the woods all day.” The thought of staying in the woods makes Marcus nervous. He looks back through the trees and can’t see the school. In the woods, Marcus wonders, could he build a fire? Pick through poisonous plants? Already he’s feeling a little turned around. Which way is west; does he remember? Now he thinks maybe he doesn’t. Was west the direction of the road home or the school? Marcus isn’t very good at science. That’s only a myth about kids good with math being good at science, that kids who can add and divide must know how to bond atoms and build volcanoes. That’s only something somebody made up one time.

“You can go home,” says Optimus. “I’ll find my own way.”

“What are you going to do?” Marcus doesn’t want to admit that he’s lost.

"Word problems." Sure enough, Optimus has sat up and started gathering rocks.

"That's stupid, we can do word problems at home."

"Don't call *me* stupid. *I* didn't push my best friend down in the woods." Optimus crawls over to a tree and breaks off a few twigs, collecting them in a small stack in his hand.

"Well," says Marcus, scuffing a clod of dirt with his toe, "what's the word problem, anyway?"

"I'm not telling."

"Tell me, come on."

"No way, Jorge."

"Just tell me, Optimus. Please? I'm sorry I pushed you down in the dirt."

"Hey—what's the dirt times home times west times infinity?"

"West times infinity? Infinity. Duh."

"Right," says Optimus, standing and brushing himself off. He plucks several more rocks from the ground. Optimus starts off in one straight direction through the woods, dipping under a branch, stepping over a root. He drops one rock, then another, then a stick as he goes. The woods, Marcus recalls, border the road his bus takes. If they can get through the woods, find the road and turn left, they will know the way home from there.

"How are you going to lay out infinity sticks and rocks?" says Marcus, tripping after his robot. Marcus is curious. He really wants to know. Marcus knows Optimus didn't mean to mess up. He didn't mean to let that happen back there.

Marcus takes a few steps toward the first rock, then a few steps more toward the second. He pauses to listen to the swish of traffic he can hear now, wafting down over the high quilt of leaves.

Optimus breaks another twig off a tree, scoops another rock from the ground. “Watch me,” he says, pushing through a clump of low-hanging plants, cutting a sure path through the trees.

Three

"It's going to be different for you now," the doctor tells Anica. From the top of the hospital bed, she can see the brim of his blue cap over the split of her legs. He is not meeting her eyes anymore; no one is meeting Anica's eyes. "It's going to feel different," he says. "But you still have to push."

Anica throws her head back against the sweat stains on her pillow. Around the limp shag of her hair, the stains spread out in rings like the years of a tree. Thirty-six hours of stains. Thirty-six hours of labor, at the end of which the doctors have just told her there will be no reward. Nothing to set in a crib, or suckle. Nothing to love. Nothing to name (the name: it would have been Jane, for her mother). Hers will not be a baby at all, but a frozen blue coil of flesh. Stillbirths are rare in this day and age, this hospital, but they are not unheard of. Very few things are ever truly unheard of.

The doctor is wrong about Anica, though. To her, in this moment, it feels the same as it has the past day and a half. Her 33-year-old body has long ago gone numb with the pain, but she can still sense the enormous, body-wide squirm of her nerves. Head to toe, down to the clenched tip of each finger, Anica's insides are still thrashing with a tangled sense of ultimate crisis. Her body tells her there is still time, and it pushes, hard.

And when the doctor reaches his hand inside Anica and takes hold of the baby by one of its feet, she could swear the baby draws up its leg in response. As the doctor pulls her said-to-be-dead girl from her body, Anica feels something other than the

cold knobs of a spine, than the latex hand sliding out from the bloody slick between her legs. A flick of a small wrist, or the tiny kick of a pulse. She turns her head away from the umbilical snip, away from the long face of the nurse. Away from Michael, her husband, who has Anica's hand and is crying into her neck. Holding the crumpled worm shape of the blanket, the nurse starts to cry, too.

Not Anica. She shuts her eyes and thinks on that flick in her thighs. She is certain she could not have imagined it.

Anica feels something wet roll down into her armpit. She reaches a hand under her cotton gown with the realization that she has begun lactating.

That night, Anica is kept in the hospital to observe her vitals, to chart her wellbeing with several collated pages of jumps and dips on a graph. The jumps are far higher than the dips are low, as though Anica's heart were leaping in great bursts to reach some unseen but particular object or height. A budvase of hyacinths sits by her window, a gift from the staff of the library where Anica works, shelving books and making changes for fines, and where, because she's lately enjoyed eating beets from the can, a busy circus of pink rings stains her desk. From the flowers the card has been plucked from its holder.

Anica's parents and in-laws shuffle in from the lobby to talk and cry and clutch Anica's arm. They ask if they can come stay a while with Anica and Michael, who both shake their heads no. Anica and Michael allocate arrangements to the hospital, deciding against a service and a grave, although for reasons that differ from one another.

“What could it do for us?” Michael sits in a hard chair next to the bed, picks at a frayed thread on the sheets. “What could anyone say? I don’t want to hear what anyone has to say.”

Anica’s head is sunk back into her pillow. She gazes at the budvase, so stuffed with its top-heavy green stems. Her fingers graze over that spot on her thigh. “No funeral,” she agrees. “No grave.”

The night after that, the first night back at the house, Anica lies awake next to Michael, who sleeps. She reads bars of light from cars on the walls. They slink around the room like fish, over Anica, past an unopened bottle of pills on the nightstand.

Sometime after 11, she becomes aware of a wide, unmuffled cry. It seems to bend in the wind that whistles through the large oak tree by their window. Anica first thinks she is dreaming the sound, but when the wind dies down, the crying does not. The nurses warned her about this, that she might hear some crying. Still, she didn’t expect it to be this close or severe. She turns onto her side and folds a pillow over her head, but the cries eat straight through the memory foam, coiling themselves around the cave parts of her ears.

There’s nothing to do but roll back onto her stomach and wait. It’s strange to be able to lie on her stomach again. Her body feels empty and loose, separate from the spiral of corkscrewing pressure in her head. Anica rises and draws a tall bath. The heat soothes the swollen space between her legs, but when she dips her head in the water, the pain only slops around in her ears. She sits up and the water slips off her sternum. Anica drains the tub and pulls on a robe. Downstairs she beats yeast and

dough into a ball and tucks it under a wet towel in a bowl. She does a Sudoku. Four before six after nine. The scrambled blocks of numbers don't make sense, but in a way they do.

In the morning Michael fawns over the bread, which has baked blond and glowing and crisp. He makes a show of breathing in the smell of the bread, slathers butter over a generous heel. Anica sips a cup of plain tea. She doesn't know when the crying stopped. Not early.

The library calls to tell Anica they won't hear of having her come back to work, not so soon, not right away—although, they want her to know, they do miss her. They have been thinking about her. Anica imagines a row of grandmotherly buns bowed over the reference desk. She touches her own hair, brown curls that hang down over her shoulders. She knows there is no difference in policy between bereavement and maternity leave. Full benefits, automatic approval. For all intents and purposes, they are exactly the same.

Anica has "maternity" penciled in on her planner with a light lead line that runs over six weeks. At the end of the first week, she quits her job. Her supervisor begs her to reconsider. They are short-staffed and Anica is a favorite. She is a whiz with the card catalogue and the only one who can unjam the printer. No one hosts a story hour like Anica. She reads choose-your-own-adventures, always respecting the popular vote.

At his own workplace Michael Internet searches stages of grief. Clicks on "denial." Clicks on "defense," and reads what he sees there. "I need time," she tells Michael, and he tells her he understands. He really thinks he does understand.

Anica and Michael pack the nursery into boxes for Goodwill and the attic. Anica rolls baby socks into balls. Michael folds onesies and tiny, palm-sized tees. One of the onesies says “Stop the Slaughter: Boycott Baby Oil.” They bought it at the beach last summer.

At the crib Anica reaches for the quilt lining. When her thumb brushes the fabric, she feels the curl of a small grip on her finger.

“Oh!” she cries, and the grip releases, is gone.

“What is it?” says Michael.

“Oh,” she says, touching her finger on the spot. “The crib. A hinge.”

Her husband lifts the first stack of boxes. When he leaves for the car, Anica reaches again for the blanket. Nothing. Outside, she hears the slam of the car door.

A quick rise of nausea rolls up Anica’s throat. She runs for the bathroom and throws up in the sink. Only a little comes out, but it feels like a lot. The vomit on her tongue is white and bland, not yellow and soured like what she spat up six months ago. It’s the same grainy texture that still leaks through her bra. She hears a second car door open and shut. Anica rinses her mouth with water and spits. Where was the banana toast she had for breakfast? Her mouth tastes vaguely of rice pudding and milk.

In the driver’s seat, Michael stalls, buffing a streak on the windshield with his sleeve. He, too, is in pain. Of course he is. He rises each morning to hang his head over the sink. In the hospital he saw what Anica couldn’t, and now he has terrible dreams about babies, about dropping them, holding their soft heads underwater in baths. In one dream the baby snaps at him with sharp gums and tries to kick free from

his arms—the harder he works to hold it, the more purchase it gains. A private part of Michel thinks the baby they've lost was more his. It had been his idea. He had *wanted* that baby. Their house wants a family. His friends' children adore him. Michael envies the fathers at his office, too distracted by birthdays and loose teeth to notice their own mussed hair and chance beards. It had taken some coaxing with Anica but he'd known the baby was the right thing to do; as she grew larger, they had hovered around to each other, cooking dinners together, pulling out old board games and road bikes. Now how long will they wait? Years, he imagines. Anica is an intentional person. She likes planning, likes to think. He can guess how they will move on from here: slowly.

Within the week, almost everything for the baby has been donated or packed away. Anica grieves. She still hears crying some nights, and sometimes during the day. In the hours when Michael is at work, she wraps herself in a blanket and rocks in a wicker chair in their bedroom. They bought the chair for breastfeeding, but it cost too much money to pack up or give away. Anica sticks her fingers through a downy gap in the blanket, stretching the hole into a five-pointed star. When she takes out her fingers, the star shape folds, but it stays.

Anica resumes a yoga routine. Before, she taught a morning class at the library, to geriatrics and the rare young person with time on a Tuesday. Anica takes her time now. She cradles each of her limbs, rolls the length of her spine onto the floor. When Michael finds her he thinks she is asleep, and over dinner that night asks her how she is feeling. "But really *feeling*," he says, reaching over to close Anica's magazine.

Anica feels annoyed. She was reading an article on machines of the future. There was a remote-controlled toilet, a singing garbage disposal, a car that could fold itself into the size of a shoe. The descriptions are thorough and not so hard to fathom. The car, in particular, Anica could see clearly. She'd like to tell Michael she wasn't asleep on the floor, only listening.

The last day of the month, Anica's breasts are still weeping milk. Her noontime nap is weak and leaks cries. Anica tucks deeper into the rocking chair. She tries holding onto her sleep, and, when she cannot, tries moving to different parts of the house. In the kitchen, the cries bounce off the tiles in unfading ricochets. In the mudroom they're hollow against the pocked cement, the emptiness of the sound terrible to hear. Anica walks around, patting the walls.

The day's mail has been pushed through the door slot; Anica's foot skids on the small stack of envelopes. She scoops them up, flipping distractedly through the bills and catalogues. It's a waiting game now. She can find something in here to buy, or to read. When a cardstock flyer slits a cut in her thumb, Anica pops the nick in her mouth. She sucks on the finger til it's bloodless and numb.

Apple Tree Preschool, reads the flyer, letters emblazoned over a lacquered cutout of leaves. It's not the preschool they'd had in mind—she's heard rumors of oversize classes, static curricula. Still, she wonders. Maybe they would have picked it after all. In the kitchen, Anica drinks a full glass of water, moving it over the brackish lump in her throat. A time will come. She likes to be sure. One of the wails hiccups, a quick hitch of panic. With a finger Anica closes off her left ear. She picks up the house phone and dials the number for the school.

In his office across town, Michael's last meeting of the day runs long. He leaves the building later than normal; it's close to five-thirty when he pulls out of the lot. Traffic's bad.

Apple Tree is glad to hear from Anica. They are happy she called. She's seen the flyer, has she? Wonderful. And she's interested in the school? Fine, simply fine. A home visit is the first step in Apple Tree's procedural course of things. Someone like Anica, clearly thoughtful, a researcher, could appreciate that, couldn't she—an established system, a proven routine—and Anica agrees that she could.

At a quarter to six, close to half of the way home, Michael sees his wife's favorite pizzeria ahead on the right. He decides to surprise her with carryout, maybe a bottle of wine. He clicks on the turn signal.

Apple Tree wants to know: Would she like to schedule a home visit? Anica would. As for seven this evening—yes, they could hear her, could she hear them?—as for seven this evening, well, it's short notice, a director's day never done, but Apple Tree believes in a commitment to parent-school cooperation. Seven it is. They thank her warmly for calling. They look forward to meeting her soon.

Anica sets the phone back in its receiver, wipes a smudge off the stovetop. She taps a fingernail to her teeth and thinks. She feels better, she decides.

For the home visit, she plans to prepare a soufflé.

Anica's husband places his order for a large Hawaiian pie, extra sauce, extra pineapple.

Mushrooms and gruyere, Anica thinks. Fresh parsley and paprika.

Anica's husband adds two chocolate cannolis to the order for dessert.

White wine, Anica thinks.

On the carryout menu, her husband points to a bottle of red.

Anica imagines slicing into the potted, delicate puff of the soufflé. It will emit a hot cloud of steam. She will lift the first slice with a pie server and set it down neatly on the preschool director's plate. *Oh no*, she imagines herself saying to the preschool director. *No trouble. No trouble at all.*

Races with Zombies

The first time Kenny met his half-sister, Jess, was when she showed up at the house last June, when Gram swung up the door, took one look at her backpack, set her up with a seat and an iced tea and a cross-exam. Did Jess have a boyfriend. No. Friends who party and rave. No. Did she do drugs. No. Have employment history? A little. Thrift stores, Piercing Pagodas at malls. Was Jess in a "family way." No. In trouble—was anyone going to come here *looking* for Jess? No. Hum. Could Jess cook, had anyone taught her that.

For some reason, this was the question that seemed to irritate Jess. Kenny watched as, across the kitchen table, she turned from the view of the cornstalks, from the red-popsicle sun sinking down over the field, to give a Gram a cold look and set down her tea.

In the weeks since, Kenny and Jess have learned to sidestep one another, circling each other's meal schedules and turns at the shower. Kenny doesn't let Jess see him sneaking looks as she slips out the door, pinkish-red hair flicking back like a flag, or gazing sideways at Jess on TV nights while she sips Mr. Pibb from a can, Gram's dusty sewing machine and zucchini plant between them. Kenny lets Jess pick what they watch. *Lois and Clarke* is too kissy. He likes the green zombies in *Mutant League*.

Kenny's going as a zombie for Halloween, which, his being 8 and a half, he takes seriously. Halloween's not for two months, but he already has the full set of face paints, and last week he went with Gram to the library to learn about zombies on

the Internet. Kenny thinks it's pretty important to stay in character, and believes in the value of being prepared. Gram agrees. "The only way," she said at the time.

On the Internet, they read about brains diets and viruses and underground tunnel systems in Honduras where zombies have been proven to live. Proven irrefutably, said the Internet, showing them pictures of scratch marks on the tunnel walls. The Internet showed them different shapes of bites. They read how you can't *hurt* zombies with hardly anything, except a special acid you buy from a village in China, although the journey to the village is no picnic, warned the Internet. In China there are white-water rapids to navigate, a drawbridge slung over a ravine between glaciers (there are glaciers in China, you bet), plus a mountain range populated with wild forest hogs. Forest hogs! They are no picnic, either. But if you'd like, the Internet could arrange to have some of the acid prepackaged and sent to your home mailing address for just $99.99. The Internet would do that for you. For a fee.

"China!" Gram cried. "You're practically invincible." She tapped the screen down with a fake hot-pink nail. Sometimes when they eat popcorn and watch movies—*The Manchurian Candidate*, *Dirty Harry*—Gram scratches Kenny's back with those nails, and that always feels good.

You might think, the Internet went on, you can take on a zombie on your own—and it's true that, if you're clever, you can stave one off a *little* while. The fact is zombies didn't use to be living-dead. They used to be living-living, so they still have the impulse to run from danger inside them. With a weapon you can at least *scare* a zombie or two.

"Boo," said Gram, pinching Kenny on the arm. She hissed and pretended to

bite down on his neck.

Jess isn't going out trick-or-treating and only stared back at Kenny when he asked if she was. On Halloween she'd probably be scheduled to work spritzing perfumes behind a glass bar—a job Gram found her, says Gram, hitching her eyebrows at Jess's work heels and tight skirt, "before I knew the dress code." Jess works with Meg, who she picks up on her way in every morning, when she's always in a big rush. Kenny wonders how many people need spritzing at eight o'clock in the morning—enough, he guesses, to rush Jess, who twists her hair up with one hand while she whisks off the breakfast bowls with the other. Kenny wonders if Jess likes her job. When he grows up he wants to slay zombies, or work as a freelance pedicurist like Gram.

Some nights, Jess brings Meg home after work, and all four of them sit around watching TV. Meg sits Indian-style on the floor. She wears white fuzzy sweaters with a gold locket she twirls at her throat. She jokes with Gram, who she brings perfume samples from work, and pouts on nights Gram leaves to go out with her beauty stylist, Athena, although on those nights Meg and Jess make do. When Gram leaves they scrap the TV for candles and records Gram keeps stacked in a box without sleeves. They get barefoot and drink wine and eat fruit cocktail from the can, sucking the pink cherry chunks with their teeth. On the first of those nights Jess asked Kenny if he didn't want to scoot, but Meg winked and said, "Oh, let him stay," which warmed a shy flush of pride in Kenny. If the girls mostly ignore him, if they talk about people he doesn't know, things he can't understand, with the girls there persists for him a live curiosity that won't burn itself out. When he keeps still it's not five minutes

before they've forgotten he's there, privately basking in the shared candlelit glow.

Some of those nights, Jess and Meg play the game, the game being where they've shoplifted a store item at the end of their shift, and the thing they take can be anything; wallet, scarf, rainbow compact of eye shadows. What's more important is that they do it out of sight of the store manager but also each other—neither girl can see what the other takes. That's the *fun* of it, Kenny's heard Meg insist. They can't know what the other has til the reveal. Then, whoever's item costs more, wins.

Tonight's a game night, he can tell from the way Meg's been stealing looks at her bag. No one knows about the game except Kenny, and he's sworn to secrecy; Meg made him promise on a TV Guide she explained represented the American consciousness. He watches her polish off two cans of cocktail, licking the lids and curling up on the carpet, rolling over the floor like a big white poly puppy.

"All right," she finally orders Jess. "Go."

Jess smiles and runs her finger around the lip of a wine bottle, shakes her head.

Meg props herself up on her elbow. "I will, then," she says, "but you should have." From her bag, she draws out a long silky nightgown. It's yellow and pours through her fingers like hair, grazing the carpet and glinting light blond. Meg declares it to cost 32 dollars.

"Wow," says Jess. She leans back in her chair and folds her arms. "Really, wow."

"I know." Meg rubs the gown's sleeve in her fingers. "It's real silk—I don't even think I could wear it. I might give it as a birthday gift to my mom." On her back

she throws the gown in the air and allows it to flutter down, over her face. “Now you go,” she says, under the pile of ruffles.

“Why bother?” Jess slides her eyes over to Kenny. “Thirty-two dollars.”

“Give it up, Jess.”

“What’s the point?” she says. A small blue swatch of cloth appears in her fingers, and she hands it to Meg. “Here.”

Through the slow rise, the disbelief, the brief squall of shrieking broken by yammering questions, Kenny comes to understand that the swatch of cloth is not cloth, but in fact only made to look that way, a trick of finely chopped jewels packed in tight enough rows to ripple and roll over your skin *like* cloth, as Kenny sees when they finally pass it to him. The swatch is no swatch at all, but a choker, an expensive one—and not just expensive, Meg impresses. Ex*pen*sive, so much money it’s not tagged with a price tag, but lives at the store in its own glass security case, one somehow outfoxed by Jess, and for this, Kenny understands, Jess has won the game, and not just for tonight.

While Meg prepares a second bottle of wine, Kenny toys with the necklace, whose metal won’t warm in his hands, or hold shape. It pools at the base of his palm, a dead lead-ish weight, nothing at all like he expects things to feel. The kitchen seems to have grown louder to Kenny. There’s the garbage disposal, the dull needle rip drowning out Nina Simone. He hands back the choker, suddenly tired with the secrets inside him, all this information he’s sworn to tuck carefully and forever away.

Kenny pads upstairs, passing Gram’s room, still empty. Sometimes Gram stays out late with Athena. Once a week they rustle up three or four girls to play

poker and drink whiskey sours—weeks they can't be bothered to rustle, they drink sours still. The sours make Gram's breath thick and ticklish on his cheek when she leans down to check on him when she gets home, and Kenny can just picture Gram in the red Silverado on her way home to him now, clicking her nails on the steering wheel, cruising past Meg on her walk back to her own house, crooning along to the all-Elvis radio show and maybe the love songs making her think on how hard she loves Kenny. Kenny loves to hear Gram sing, and she does Elvis best. Her voice is as soft and cozy as getting wrapped in a hug. Tonight he's asleep before Gram comes to check on him, but he is sure that she does.

The next morning, Kenny and Jess are up early, fixing their breakfast at the kitchen countertop island. When Jess looks up, the Tupperware springs from her hands, drops and rolls, sausage gravy lubbing out on the floor. Gram's not wearing her usual blue jeans and windbreaker. She's dressed in a romper and white suspenders slung from her waist like horse stirrups. It looks like she's gone after her French braid with sewing shears, hacking and chewing it off at the ears. Her face is wiped of its regular blue and pink powders. It hangs over her body, blank and pale as the moon.

"Ain't it hot," Gram announces. She walks to the kitchen sink and proceeds to peel off her fake nails, one by one.

Jess says good morning and Gram frowns, picking at a hunk of glue on her thumb. Jess asks how Gram's feeling and she says hot as a hussy, and is there anything to drink.

"How was Athena's last night?" Jess asks. She steps forward and hands Gram a tall glass of milk.

Gram glugs the milk down without breaking for breath or from her scowl at Jess over the glass. When she's done, she sets it down by the drain. "Truck's not for sale."

Jess tips up the window shade and looks out. Kenny goes over to stand next to Gram. When she sees him, a big smile breaks out on her face, full moon lifting up into a crescent.

"I'll tell you," she says, whispering. "Because you're a very, very good boy."

"What is it, Gram?"

Gram traces Kenny's chin with her finger. She bends down with wide twinkling blue eyes.

"Kenny," says Jess, in a firm voice. "Come on with me to the truck."

"Don't be long!" Gram calls after them, waving. One of the loosed nails drops from her hand. Gram barks in surprise, then stamps the fake thumbpiece with her foot like a bug.

In the driveway, Jess walks the whole way around the truck's rear and side bumpers. She pauses at the left headlight and runs her hand over the paint, where a dull buckle's appeared in the hood. It's small enough, like if a circus strongman put his hand there and pushed. When they get in she's quiet, although on the drive through town she frowns and goes slow. The engine makes a dim ticking sound. Kenny can feel Jess's eyes on the road, scanning left to right but always pulling back to the bumped spot in the steel.

Jess pulls onto the street for Athena's, and she meets them at the door in shower shoes and one fake eyelash, tipsy high cones of blue hair, a bullmastiff nosing

the skirt of her robe. Did Gram have her *hair* when she left? Is Athena hearing Jess right? She'd been wearing, let's see now, a tracksuit jacket and jeans. What sort of funk? Gram was in fine spirits last night, just fine. Oh, *spirits*? Well, she didn't mean it like that, but now that Jess mentions it ... well, their grandma's never been shy around bourbon. Athena eyes Kenny holding his hand out to the bullmastiff, who declines to sniff.

On the ride back, Jess stops at a stoplight and makes Kenny put on his seatbelt, then tugs at it to make sure it's tight. Then she says they have to take Gram to the hospital, that she doesn't like it but they're just going to have to. Kenny keeps still in his seat, looking out at the passing houses and fields. He doesn't like hospitals and he knows Gram *really* doesn't, that Gram's worse than Kenny and once sewed up her own foot with a sewing needle and thread after she accidentally stepped on a spade.

Sure enough, when they get back to the house Gram's in the middle of a paraffin-wax treatment and says she can't go. Jess says they can wait for the wax but when it's done they are going, they really are going to go, and Gram nods and says oh she agrees but it's a special treatment that can't be rushed, and does she want some while she waits? No, Jess does not. What about little boy? How about him? Kenny thinks about it and decides that he might, so Gram asks him to please take off his shoes and socks. She has Kenny sit down on the couch and shows him how to dip his foot down in the white tub and lift it and slowly dip it again. The wax *does* feel nice on his feet. When they're done Gram wraps them in bags with grips she ties in a bow, and when Kenny asks how long they have to keep the bags on, Gram says a while,

two movies at least, even though Kenny feels a tiny web of wax cracks breaking over his big toe before Scorpio even makes his first kill.

The day wears on. Kenny burrows into the couch, tucking his bagged feet up toward Gram, whose head's lolled back in the big chair and snoring, a sound that drowns out the voices floating in from the kitchen. Kenny's sleepy, too. His head starts to droop a few times but keeps bobbing back up, awake. Twin fuzzy figures pass before him, briefly blocking the light from the TV. Kenny raises his head in greeting, but neither girl glances toward his pile of blankets.

Meg studies Gram where she lies in the chair. She shrugs at Jess, who hovers behind her.

"Has she been like this all day?"

Jess rubs the skin on her elbows. "No. I don't know. She won't go to the hospital."

"What can do you? If she won't go." Meg's sweater passes back through the glow of the screen, which lights her like a heavenly creampuff.

"Did you see what she's wearing?" Jess trails her into the kitchen. Meg opens the fridge door and pops the lid from the pickle jar, taking one. She helps herself to the carton of orange juice.

"So you know, they're declaring a 48-hour grace period," says Meg, picking the warts off the pickle. "At work. They're saying they haven't told the police and don't want to."

Kenny's perked awake now. He remembers Meg saying last night that Jess wouldn't need her job now, that she didn't need *her* job, that they'd be jewel thieves

together and live off what they could pawn. But that was a joke, or they'd laughed, anyway, spilling the small stacked height of cans, and he watches Jess bend down now to pick up one of the lids. Her face is tight. She opens the fridge door and shuts it. Kenny sees she knows it's not true, *he* knows it's not true, that no matter what Meg says she doesn't know what any one of them needs.

Jess is working a big knot in her throat, bobbing it up and down. Her voice is pinched when she talks. "Have they called cops before? To the store—before I came."

Meg cocks her head like she's thinking. "Yeah," she decides. "Yeah, they have."

Jess nods and turns to gather the rest of the cans. "A grace period," she says. "I'll think about it."

"I wouldn't," says Meg. She tosses her hair like a pony. "I'd think heightened security, cameras. I'd think juvenile detention. Never return to the scene of the crime, Jess."

Jess stands at the sink and mutters under her breath. Her hair's fallen over her face. "What?" says Meg. She pops the last of the pickle into her mouth.

"They might already know."

"That's true," Meg concedes, chewing. "They might."

Kenny thought Jess might be mad about the wax treatment, but after Meg leaves, she comes to sit next to him for *Mean Streets* and her hand finds his on the couch. Jess's fingers are weighted with rings that scratch Kenny's palm and he focuses on not having to itch. They stay like that, Kenny's feet sweating inside the

white bags, the inside of their hands forming a hot, invisible glue. Then it's time for lunch and Jess says she guesses she can make eggs.

Kenny unwraps his feet from the bags and most of the wax and returns them to his shoes. He leaves Gram and goes out to the backyard by the field, where he mows an anthill with his toe and kicks up scuds of dust. When he starts jogging the length of the field, Kenny slaps the leaves with his fingers and wills his legs to push faster, run longer. Inside, Jess is cooking with the windows pushed out. Kenny can hear the hiss of eggs on the pan. He can see the bob of her pink head over the stove.

Kenny can smell Jess's baking fat licking the air. Gram doesn't use fat. She uses big pats of butter that skate around in the pan, tracing pretty white tracks and skids. Kenny likes butter, buttered potatoes, buttered popped corn, butter-basted green string beans. Buttered fried chicken's his favorite. He wishes he had some of Gram's buttered fried chicken right now. He runs faster, his half-open mouth practically twitching for it, the tiny buds on his tongue jumping and straining to capture the taste. When they feel like they might just finally leap out of his mouth is the moment he first sees the zombie through the leaves.

Kenny knows it's a zombie right away. The figure has its back turned to him and slips quick through the corn. Still, Kenny can *feel* it's a zombie. It's just something you feel right off the bat. In the last month, whenever he's tried to creep up on Gram in the kitchen or around back of her chair, Gram would laugh and say, "I can *feel* you, Kenny. You can't scare me."

Kenny twitches his nose. The air's hot. A mustard-smell's wafting in off the field. What he wants is to turn around and run inside the house, to shimmy his body

as far as it'll go under the hard-to-reach side of his bed. But what kind of message would that send? Kenny stays where he is. He reaches back for the slingshot he always keeps tucked in his jeans' butt pocket.

"You don't scare me, zombie," he says in a loud and clear voice, the kind he remembers the Internet saying to use when you come face-to-face with one.

The field spreads before Kenny like a vast swamp, fluid and impulsive. The shades of green shuffle and bear down in the wind, the stalks bending to currents that swoop down from above. The currents stop sometimes for no reason at all, or pick up and rush out of the field in a hot thrust of energy and haunted breath. There's no telling anymore, Kenny thinks, what could come rushing out with it. Kenny thinks that if this were a movie, he'd see staggering rows of white zombies, whole lurching throngs of them. They'd stump through the fields, sniffing the corn, tearing the silk and rubbing it on their faces. The zombies would rip an ear from a stalk and stuff the leaves in their mouths and garble at Kenny while they tried choking them down.

No, warned the Internet. Don't believe the movies. ("Ain't that the truth," said Gram.) That's not how it works. Zombies are stealthy. They learn quick, and they're watching, so you'd better watch them.

Kenny watches. The leaves bend, glinting silver and white in the sun. He wonders about last night, if a zombie could have made that handprint on the car. Didn't the Internet say zombies are extra-strong? Didn't it say they travel through tunnels? Kenny knows about tunnels. Last spring his baseball rolled down a manhole whose cover was popped off like a lid and Gram explained how tunnels run all over, everywhere, through underground. What did real zombies look like, anyway? The

Internet didn't show pictures of zombies, just pictures of places zombies had been. Kenny always thinks of grownup zombie men, but what about zombie ladies? Little boys? Could a zombie be young? What about pretty zombies? A thought flashes through his mind of Meg as a zombie, even though no, Meg isn't a zombie. You didn't know what they looked like but you could *feel* one and get away, if you felt it and knew. Still, it had to be scary. Up close and personal with a zombie, you probably got pretty spooked. Afterwards, you probably felt pretty strange. All you could say for sure is a zombie was out there, definitely out there, and there were so many secrets you never knew who you could trust.

At night, Kenny looks down at the field from his bedroom. He cracks open his window and sniffs. The Internet said zombie breath smells like sulfur. Kenny catches an unmistakable whiff. It's a good thing he's knows about this sort of thing. Kenny sticks to the window like glue, looking out over the expanse of the field. When he gets tired he works on a plug of Gram's chewing tobacco, not chewing it so much as sort of licking it now and then. It fills his nostrils with a smell like Gram's peaches and vanilla-cake smell. Kenny doesn't think she would mind. When he drifts off he dreams of Gram at the window, chewing and keeping guard over the field. He dreams of Jess's small pink head, nodding in time with the radio playing over the stove.

The next day, Jess is late for work. "Look, I'm late," says Jess. She has her head slung to the side and she's tugging on a black earring. She has that rushed look in her eyes. Kenny hangs onto his bowl. His eyes fall to Meg's sock on floor, where it's been lying since it rolled off two nights ago.

"Now I've got to get." Jess is digging through the drawer for her keys, a lock

of hair already jumped loose from her bun. “I may be at work late tonight? It’s Saturday but if they ask me to stay I might have to.” Jess flicks her eyes over at Kenny. It’s the look people give him when they let slip a bad word or sexy piece of gossip. “That’s fine,” he says. He has his own plans for the day.

Kenny rises and takes his bowl to the sink. Upstairs he hears the basin faucet squeak off. There are footsteps, then a heavy groan of pipes from the tub.

Jess casts a glance at the ceiling.

“She’ll stay up there,” she says, “won’t she?” Jess looks at Kenny from across the kitchen. He nods because it feels like she’s waiting for him to.

Kenny wishes Gram *wouldn’t* stay up there, that she’d come down and make him some blueberry French toast. Instead, he waits for the sounds of the slammed door, the truck pulling out. Kenny pulls a fresh glass from the cupboard and sloshes it full with more milk. He takes it upstairs past the bathroom and sets it outside Gram’s bedroom. On his way back, he pauses at the crack in the door. Gram’s sharking around on all fours in the bathtub, her silk robe floating over her like spilled paint. Perched on her head is a high flowered hat, and she’s wagging her eyebrows at herself in the mirror.

Downstairs, Kenny tugs on his cap. When he leaves, he turns left out the driveway. It’s a two-mile walk to the library. Inside he has to wait for the Internet because there’s only one today, the other Internet’s broken. He sits in a plastic chair and keeps his weight on the side without cracks. He watches a man look at tattoos on the Internet. Another man gazes for a long time at cats.

On Kenny’s turn, he reads about flamethrowers. A flamethrower’s a good way

to scare zombies, says the Internet. Third-best is a gun, but really, there's no substitute for the $99.99 acid from China, not for the serious slayer of the undead. The acid arrives by mail in a special acid-proof can when you send cash or personal check, although cash is best.

There's simply nothing else like it, the Internet says. The acid's thick and black and comes stamped with a green skull so you know it means business. Kenny closes his eyes, letting the glow of the skull on the computer wash over his face. He wants that acid more than anything, bad enough to make it float off the screen at him, a little. Computer print jobs are a nickel, so he waits for the librarian to go to the bathroom before he clicks send, quickly folds the page and stuffs it in his pocket.

Jess isn't home when Kenny gets back to the house. She's not back for lunch, or when a *Mutant League* marathon starts at two. Kenny watches two *Mutant Leagues*, the one in the Hall of Pain and the one where Razor Kidd gets addicted to Buzz. He goes upstairs for a sweater. The glass of milk's gone. From her room, he hears Gram roll over in bed. For lunch, he eats cereal and saws a cut of peach tobacco off with a butter knife.

Kenny does some other things.

At the hall closet he digs out his Nerf pellet gun. At the back door he rolls the sweater and wraps it and ties it over his head.

Outside, the field's bright and still. Kenny walks out and clears his throat and tries to keep his voice steady, clutching his gun. "What do you want, zombie?" he calls out. "You want to take a run at my gun?"

That's good, he says to himself in his head. *That was real steady.* A line of

brown juice dribbles down Kenny's chin.

"Chicken, zombie?" he cries. His voice bounces off the distant wall of a barn. The tobacco juice seeps into the collar of his T-shirt. Kenny breathes in the scent of sulfur. There's a distant rumbling, and a white flash flips past in the corn. With zombies, you've got to show them who's boss, said the Internet. Kenny clutches the Nerf gun to his chest and steps into the field. Behind him, the crunch of wheels over gravel rolls up the drive.

Kenny starts to run. He hears doors being pushed open and shut through the house, the faraway sound of Jess calling his name over the rustling sigh of the leaves, the hard heavy thump of blood in his ears.

Kenny didn't want to have to rob Jess, but how else was he supposed to pay for the acid? The choker was at the bottom of Jess's pajama drawer, coiled up next to a button. He dropped it into one of Gram's holiday envelopes stuffed with the printed Internet order form and stuck with eight candy-cane stamps. Kenny hopes eight stamps was enough for China. He made sure to double-count, on the walk to the blue box at the end of the road.

There's no seeing in front of him over the corn. Leaves whip at his hands and face, swiping the gun from his arms, but he's too scared to go back. How far has he run? The sulfur smell digs at the back of his throat. A thrust of wind's moving in from the right side of the field; from far off comes the sound of feet pounding the back steps. The white flash darts past to his left, headed in the direction of the house.

Blood pounding, he cuts right and takes off down the row. A strawberry head floats by up ahead, moving up-field. Kenny cuts right a second time, now in the same

direction of the zombie, and prays Jess didn't see him. Kenny imagines himself and the zombie from an aerial view, sprinting side by side, separated by only a few thin dusty streaks.

His name breaks over his head like a bird-cry. Kenny's heart leaps to his throat. She's seen him. If he keeps going this way, any minute now she'll be closing in on his left.

The sulfur scent's getting stronger. Distinctly zombie. Unquestionably zombie. He's gaining on it. Is that better or worse? Kenny knows the zombie would slurp out his brains, that it would clamp down on his neck with a mouthful of sharp teeth. It wouldn't feel good. The zombie would brag to its friends about the delicious supper it ate, or more likely, the light snack. It would take five or six of him to count as a full meal.

But at least Kenny would go out with a fight. He'd slide over the zombie's gullet knowing he fought for himself, for Gram and for Jess, for the thing the three of them needed most.

Kenny pulls a hard right and doesn't look back. He runs for the zombie with everything that he's worth.